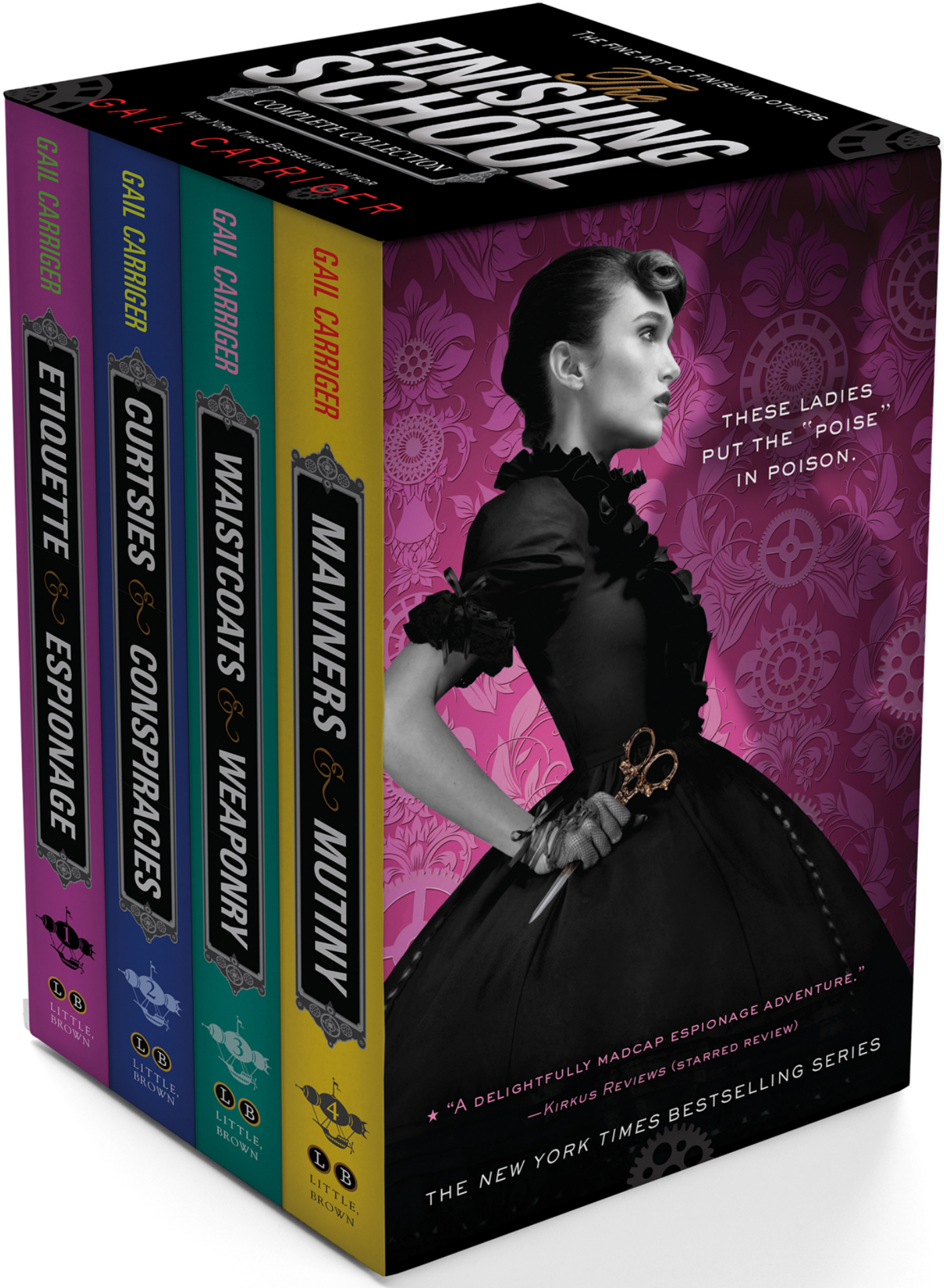
THE FINE ART OF FINISHING OTHERS
The Finishing School
COMPLETE COLLECTION
New York Times Bestselling Author
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MANNERS & MUTINY
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THESE LADIES PUT THE "POISE" IN POISON.
★ "A DELIGHTFULLY MADCAP ESPIONAGE ADVENTURE."
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

The Finishing School Complete Collection

Gail Carriger

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON

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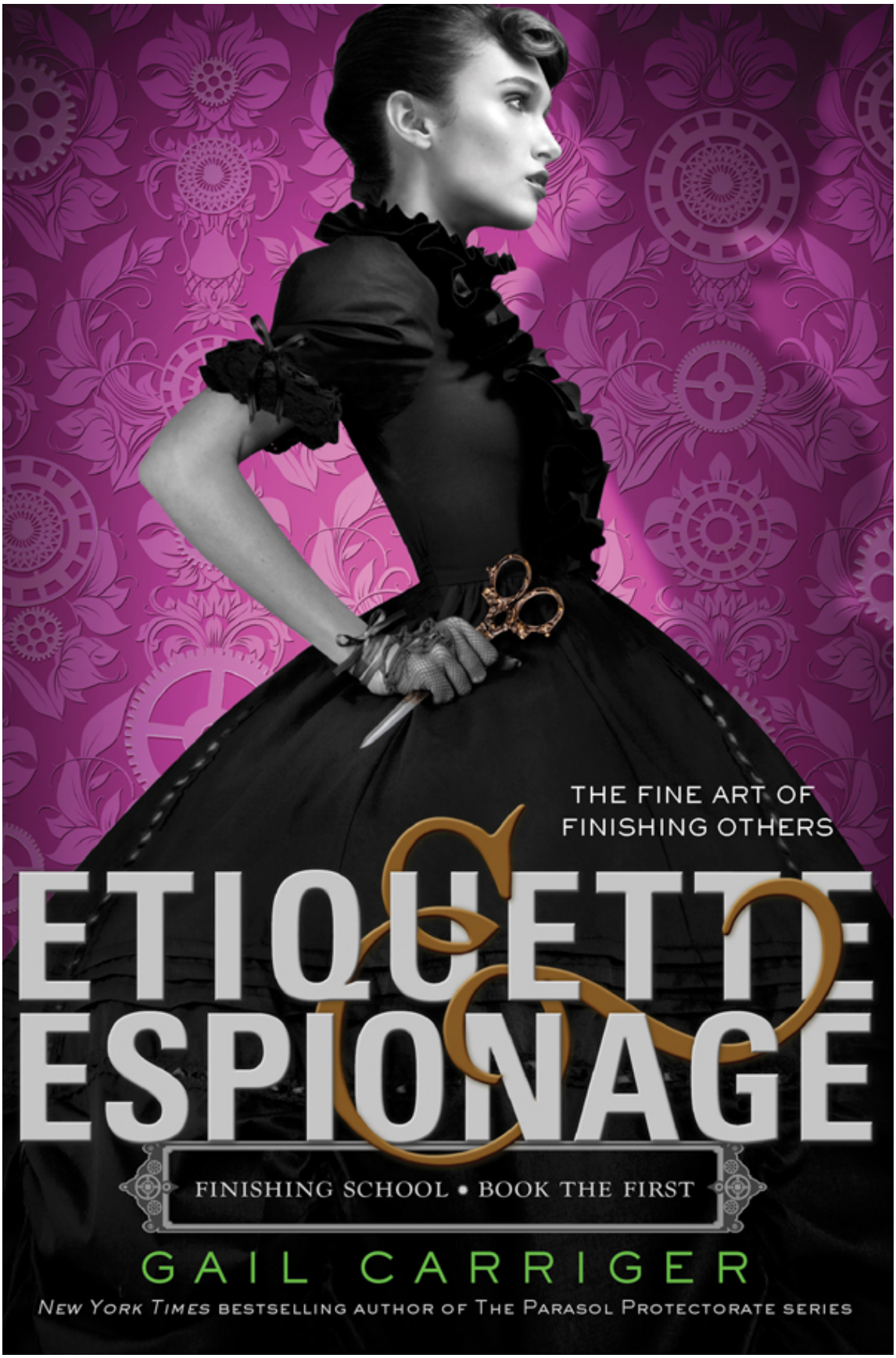
THE FINE ART OF
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ETIQUETTE & ESPIONAGE

FINISHING SCHOOL ✹ BOOK THE FIRST

GAIL CARRIGER

Little, Brown and Company

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With eternal thanks to all those who finished me, at each stage, and in the best of all possible ways:

Kathy, Carol, Harriet, James, Anne, Joe, Timi, Judith, and Tom.

There is no job harder than teaching, and to be truly great at it? Heroic.

And for Willow, representing for the next generation.

THE START OF BEING FINISHED

Sophronia intended to pull the dumbwaiter up from the kitchen to outside the front parlor on the ground floor, where Mrs. Barnaclegoose was taking tea. Mrs. Barnaclegoose had arrived with a stranger in tow. *Meddling old battle-ax.* With the hallways patrolled by siblings and household mechanicals, eavesdropping was out of the question. The only way of overhearing her mother, Mrs. Barnaclegoose, and the stranger was from inside the dumbwaiter. Mrs. Barnaclegoose had decided opinions on reforming other women's daughters. Sophronia did not want to be reformed. So she had pressed the dumbwaiter into the service of espionage.

The dumbwaiter disagreed with the whole idea of stopping at the ground floor, and instead kept on going—up all four stories. Sophronia examined the windlass machine at the top. Several lengths of india-rubber strapping made up part of the drive mechanism. *Perhaps, once the strapping was removed, the dumbwaiter might shake loose?*

The dumbwaiter had no ceiling; it was simply a bit of platform with a support cable on the inside and a pulling cable on the outside. Sophronia reached up and liberated the strapping. Nothing happened, so she took more.

It was while she wrapped the india rubber protectively around her boots—her mother had been complaining about the state of Sophronia's shoes of late—that the dumbwaiter started shaking.

Sophronia squirmed over to the pulling cable, but before she had a chance to grab it, the dumbwaiter began to descend—fast. Very fast. Too

fast. The loading door on the third floor sped past, and then the one on the second. *Perhaps removing the rubber was not such a brilliant plan.*

As the top of the next loading door appeared, Sophronia dove forward, tumbling through it and into the family's front parlor. The top skirt of her dress caught on the lip of the door and made an ominous ripping sound.

Unfortunately, Sophronia's grand escape coincided with one of the maids loading a half-eaten trifle into the dumbwaiter.

Sophronia hit the pudding on her dismount. The maid screamed. The trifle arched up into the air, scattering custard, cake, and strawberries all over the blue brocade and cream furnishings of the well-appointed parlor.

The bowl landed, in glorious perfection, atop the head of Mrs. Barnaclegoose, who was not the kind of woman to appreciate the finer points of being crowned by trifle. Nevertheless, it made for quite the spectacle as the bowl upended the last of its contents over that good lady's bonnet. Until that moment, the bonnet had been rather smart—red with black velvet ribbons and crimson ostrich feathers. The addition of a trifle, it must be admitted, made it less smart. Sophronia, with great restraint, held back a triumphant giggle. *That'll teach her to meddle.*

Mrs. Barnaclegoose was a large woman of progressive inclinations—which is to say she supported vampire and werewolf social reform, played a good deal of whist, kept a ghost in her country cottage, and even wore the occasional French gown. She accepted that dirigibles would be the next great means of transportation and that soon people might fly through the aether. She was not, however, so progressive as to accept flying food. She squealed in horror.

One of Sophronia's older sisters, Petunia, was playing at hostess. White with mortification, Petunia rushed to the aid of the older woman, assisting her in the removal of the trifle bowl. Mother was nowhere to be seen. This made Sophronia more nervous than the fact that she had just assaulted an aristocrat with a trifle.

Mrs. Barnaclegoose stood, with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances, and looked down at Sophronia, sprawled on the plush rug. Most of Sophronia's top skirt had ripped off. Sophronia was mortified to realize she was in public with her underskirt on display!

"Your mother is occupied in an important private audience. I was going to await her leisure. But for this, I shall disturb her. It is 1851, and I

believed we lived in a civilized world! Yet you are as bad as a rampaging werewolf, young miss, and someone must take action." Mrs. Barnaclegoose made it sound as though Sophronia alone were responsible for the disreputable state of the entire British Empire. Without allowing Sophronia a rebuttal, the lady waddled from the room, a plop of custard trailing down her fluffy skirts.

Sophronia flopped over onto her back with a sigh. She should check herself for injuries, or see to finding the rest of her dress, but flopping was more dramatic. She closed her eyes and contemplated the possible recriminations soon to emanate from her upset mother.

Her musings were interrupted. "Sophronia Angelina Temminnick!"

Uh-oh. She cracked a cautious eyelid. "Yes, Petunia?"

"How could you? Poor Mrs. Barnaclegoose!" *Stepping in as understudy mother today, we have elder sister. Fantastic.*

"As if I could plan such a thing." Sophronia was annoyed by the childish petulance in her own voice. She was unable to control it when around her sisters.

"I daresay you would if you could. What were you *doing* inside the dumbwaiter? And why are you lying there in your petticoats with india rubber wrapped around your feet?"

Sophronia hedged. "Uh, um, well, you see…"

Petunia looked inside the open cavity of the dumbwaiter, where the remains of Sophronia's skirt dangled merrily. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Sophronia. You've been climbing again! What are you, a ten-year-old apple boy?"

"Actually, I'm right in the middle of a recovery period. So if you wouldn't mind shoving off until I'm finished, I'd appreciate it."

Petunia, who, at sixteen, considered herself *all grown up*, was having none of it. "Look at this mess you've created. Poor Eliza."

Eliza, the now trifle-less maid, was trying to put some order to the chaos that had resulted from finding an unexpected Sophronia departing the dumbwaiter.

Sophronia crawled over to help with the strawberries and cake that now covered the room. "Sorry, Eliza. I didn't mean it."

"You never do, miss."

Petunia was not to be distracted. "Sophronia!"

“Well, sister, to be perfectly correct, I did nothing.”

“Tell that to the poor woman’s lovely bonnet.”

“The trifle did it.”

Petunia’s perfect rosebud pout twisted into a grimace that might have been an attempt to hide a smile. “Really, Sophronia, you’re fourteen years old and simply unfit for public consumption. I refuse to have you at my coming-out ball. You’ll do something dreadful, like spill the punch on the only nice-looking boy there.”

“I would never!”

“Oh, yes, you would.”

“No, I wouldn’t. We don’t happen to be acquainted with any nice-looking boys.”

Petunia ignored that jibe. “Must you be so tiresome? It’s always something.” She looked smug. “Although I believe Mumsy has finally determined what to do with you.”

“She has? Do? Do what? What’s going on?”

“Mumsy is indenturing you to vampires for a proper education. You’re old enough now for them to actually want you. Soon you’ll be putting your hair up—what else are we to do with you? You are even starting to get décolletage.”

Sophronia blushed with embarrassment at the very mention of such a thing, but managed a sputtered protest of, “She never!”

“Oh, yes! Who do you think she’s talking to *right now*? Why do you think it’s such a secret meeting? *Vampires* are like that.”

Mumsy had, of course, made the threat when any of the Temminnick children were being particularly wayward. But never could Sophronia believe such a thing actually possible. “But it’s tea! Vampires can’t be here. They can’t go out in daylight. Everyone knows that.”

Petunia, in her Petunia-ish way, dismissed this defense with a careless flap of one hand. “You think they would send a *real* vampire for the likes of you? Oh, no, that’s a drone Mumsy is talking with. I wager they’re drawing up the papers of servitude right now.”

“But I don’t *want* to be a vampire drone.” Sophronia winced. “They’ll suck my blood and make me wear only the very latest fashions.”

Petunia nodded in an I-know-more-than-you manner that was highly aggravating. “Yes. Yes, they will.”

Frowbritcher, the butler, appeared in the doorway. He paused on the threshold while his rollers transferred to the parlor tracks. He was the very latest in domestic mechanicals, about the size and shape of a daphne bush. He trundled over and looked down his beaky nasal protuberance at Sophronia. His eyes were jet-colored circles of perpetual disapproval.

"Miss Sophronia, your mother wishes to see you immediately." His voice, emanating from a music-box device deep inside his metal body, was tinny and grainy.

Sophronia sighed. "Is she sending me to the vampires?"

Petunia wrinkled her nose. "I suppose there is a possibility they won't take you. I mean to say, Sophronia, the way you dress!"

The butler only repeated, without any inflection whatsoever, "Immediately, miss."

"Should I make for the stable?" Sophronia asked.

"Oh, do *grow up*!" said Petunia in disgust.

"So I can be a puffed-up poodle-faker like you?" *As though growing up were something one could do contagiously, caught through associating with officious older sisters.* Sophronia trailed after Frowbritcher, nervously brushing her custard-covered hands against her apron. She hoped the pinafore would hide the disreputable—well, absent—state of her skirt.

The butler rolled down the hall, leading her to her father's library. An elaborate tea service was arranged there, including lace tablecloths, sponge cake, and the family's very best china. This was far more effort than was ever spent on Mrs. Barnaclegoose.

Across from Sophronia's mother, sipping tea, sat an elegant lady wearing a sour expression and a large hat. She looked like exactly the kind of woman one would expect to be a vampire drone.

"Here is Miss Sophronia, madam," said Frowbritcher from the doorway, not bothering to transfer tracks. He glided off, probably to marshal forces to clean the parlor.

"Sophronia! What did you do to poor Mrs. Barnaclegoose? She left here in a dreadful huff and—oh, simply *look* at you! Mademoiselle, please excuse my daughter's appearance. I'd tell you it was an aberration, but, sadly, it's all too common. Such a troublesome child."

The stranger gave Sophronia a prim look that made her feel about six years old. She was painfully conscious of her custardy state. No one would

ever describe Sophronia as elegant, whereas this woman was every inch a lady. Sophronia had never before considered how powerful that could be. The strange woman was also offensively beautiful, with pale skin and dark hair streaked with gray. It was impossible to discern her age, for, despite the gray, her face was young. She was perfectly dressed in a sort of spiky lace traveling gown with a massive skirt and velvet trim that was much more elegant than anything Sophronia had ever seen in her life. Her mother was more a follower of trends than a purveyor of fine taste. This woman was truly stylish.

Despite her beauty, she looks, thought Sophronia, *a little like a crow.* She stared down at her feet and tried to come up with an excuse for her behavior, other than spying on people. "Well, I simply wanted to see how it worked, and then there was this—"

Her mother interrupted. "How it worked? What kind of question is that for a young lady to ask? How often have I warned you against fraternizing with technology?"

Sophronia wondered if that was a rhetorical question and began counting up the number of times just in case it wasn't. Her mother turned back to their guest.

"Do you see what I mean, mademoiselle? She's a cracking great bother."

"What? *Mumsy!*" Sophronia was offended. Never before had her mother used such language in polite company.

"Silence, Sophronia."

"But—"

"Do you see, Mademoiselle Geraldine? Do you see what I must endure? And on a daily basis. *A bother.* Has been from the beginning. And the other girls were such little blessings. Well, I suppose we were due. I tell you this in complete confidence—I'm at my wit's end with this one. I really am. When she isn't reading, she's taking something apart or flirting with the footman or climbing things—trees, furniture, even other people."

"That was years ago!" objected Sophronia. *Will she never let that go? I was eight!*

"Hush, child." Mrs. Temminnick didn't even look in her daughter's direction. "Have you ever heard of the like with a *girl*? Now, I know she's a little brazen for finishing school, but I was hoping you might make an exception, just this once."

Finishing school? Then I'm not being sent to the vampires? Relief flooded through Sophronia, instantly followed by a new horror. *Finishing school!* There would be *lessons*. On how to curtsy. On how to dress. On how to eat with one's finger in the air. Sophronia shuddered. Perhaps a vampire hive was a better option.

Mrs. Temminnick pressed on. "We are certainly willing to provide compensation for your considering Sophronia. Mrs. Barnaclegoose told me, in confidence, that you are masterly with troublesome cases. You have an excellent record. Why, only last week one of your girls married a viscount."

Sophronia was rattled. "Really, Mumsy!" *Marriage? Already?*

As yet, the crow had said nothing. This was a common occurrence around Sophronia's mother. The stranger merely sipped her tea, the bulk of her attention on Sophronia. Her eyes were hard, assessing, and her movements very precise and sharp.

Mrs. Temminnick continued. "And, of course, there is dear Petunia's coming-out ball to consider. We were hoping Sophronia might be presentable for the event. This December? Well, as presentable as possible, given her… defects."

Sophronia winced. She was well aware she hadn't her sisters' looks. For some reason the Fates had seen fit to design her rather more in her father's image than her mother's. But there was no need to discuss such a thing openly with a stranger!

"That could be arranged." When the woman finally spoke, it was with such a strong French accent that her words were difficult to understand. "Miss Temminnick, why is there india rubber wrapped around your boots?"

Sophronia looked down. "Mumsy was complaining I kept scuffing them."

"Interesting solution. Does it work?"

"Haven't had a chance to test them properly." She paused. "Yet."

The stranger looked neither shocked nor impressed by this statement.

Frowbritcher reappeared. He made a motion with one clawlike mechanical arm, beckoning. Sophronia's mother stood and went to confer with the butler. Frowbritcher had a sinister habit of turning up with secrets. It was highly disconcerting in a mechanical.

After a whispered interchange, Mrs. Temminnick went red about the face and then whirled back around.

Oh, dear, thought Sophronia, *what have I done now?*

"Please excuse me for a moment. There appears to be some difficulty with our new dumbwaiter." She gave her daughter a pointed look. "Hold your tongue and behave, young lady!"

"Yes, Mumsy."

Mrs. Temminnick left the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

"Where did you get the rubber?" The crow dismissed Sophronia's mother with comparative ease, still intrigued by the shoe modification. India rubber was expensive and difficult to come by, particularly in any shape more complex than a ball.

Sophronia nodded in a significant way.

"You destroyed a dumbwaiter for it?"

"I'm not saying I did. I'm not saying I didn't, either." Sophronia was cautious. *After all, this woman wants to steal me away to finishing school. I'll be there for years and then foisted off on some viscount with two thousand a year and a retreating hairline.* Sophronia rethought her approach; perhaps a little less circumspection and some judiciously applied sabotage was called for.

"Mumsy wasn't lying, you understand, about my conduct? The climbing and such. Although it has been a while since I tried to climb up a person. And the footman and I weren't flirting. He thinks Petunia is the pip, not me."

"What about the taking apart?"

Sophronia nodded, as it was a better excuse for destroying the dumbwaiter than spying. "I'm fond of machines. Intriguing things, machines, don't you find?"

The woman cocked her head to one side. "I generally prefer to make use of them, not dissect them. Why do you do it? To upset your mother?"

Sophronia considered this. She was relatively fond of her mother, as one is apt to be, but she supposed some part of her might be on the attack. "Possibly."

A flash of a smile appeared on the woman's face. It made her look very young. It vanished quickly. "How are you as a thespian? Any good?"

"Theatricals?" *What kind of finishing school teacher asks that?* Sophronia was put out. "I may have smudges on my face, but I'm still a *lady*!"

The woman looked at Sophronia's exposed petticoat. "That remains to be seen." She turned away, as though not interested anymore, and helped herself to a slice of cake. "Are you strong?"

Down the hall, something exploded with a bang. Sophronia thought she heard her mother shriek. Both she and the visitor ignored the disruption.

"Strong?" Sophronia edged toward the tea trolley, eyeing the sponge.

"From all the climbing." A pause. "And the machine lifting, I suppose."

Sophronia blinked. "I'm not weak."

"You're certainly good at prevarication."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"That depends on whom you're asking."

Sophronia helped herself to two pieces of cake, just as though she had been invited to do so. The visitor forbore to remark upon it. Sophronia turned away briefly, in the guise of finding a spoon, to tuck one piece in her apron pocket. Mumsy wouldn't allow her any sweets for the next week once she found out about the dumbwaiter.

The woman might have seen the theft, but she didn't acknowledge it.

"You run this finishing school, then?"

"Do you run this finishing school, Mademoiselle Geraldine?" corrected the crow.

"Do you run this finishing school, Mademoiselle Geraldine?" parroted Sophronia dutifully, even though they had not been properly introduced. *Odd, in a finishing school teacher. Shouldn't she wait until Mumsy returns?*

"It *is* called Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. Have you heard of it?"

Sophronia had. "I thought only the very best families were allowed in."

"Sometimes we make exceptions."

"Are you *the* Mademoiselle Geraldine? You don't seem old enough."

"Why, thank you, Miss Temminnick, but you should not make such an observation to your betters."

"Sorry, madam."

"Sorry, Mademoiselle Geraldine."

"Oh, yes, sorry, Mademoiselle Geraldine."

"Very good. Do you notice anything else odd about me?"

Sophronia said the first thing that came to mind. "The gray in your hair. It's amiss."

“You *are* an observant young lady, aren’t you?” Then, in a sudden movement, Mademoiselle Geraldine reached and pulled out the small throw pillow from behind her back. She tossed it at Sophronia.

Sophronia, who had never before had a lady throw a pillow at her, was flabbergasted, but caught it.

“Adequate reflexes,” said Mademoiselle Geraldine, wiggling her fingers for the return of the pillow.

Bemused, Sophronia handed it back to her. “Why—”

A black-gloved hand was raised against any further questions.

Mrs. Temminnick returned at that juncture. “I do apologize. How incurably rude of me. I can’t comprehend what has happened to the dumbwaiter. It’s making the most awful racket. But you don’t want to hear of such piddling domestic *trifles*.” She put a great deal of emphasis on the word *trifles*.

Sophronia grimaced.

Mrs. Temminnick sat down, rubbing at a grease spot on her formerly impeccable gloves. “How are you and Sophronia getting on?”

Mademoiselle Geraldine said, “Quite well. The young lady was just telling me of some history book she was recently reading. What was the subject?”

So, she doesn’t want Mumsy to know she’s been throwing pillows at me? Sophronia was never one to let anyone down when fibs were required.

“Egypt. Apparently the Primeval Monarchy, which follows directly after the Mythical Period, has been given new dates. And—”

Her mother interrupted. “That’s more than enough of *that*, Sophronia. A headmistress isn’t interested in education. Really, Mademoiselle Geraldine, once you get her started she’ll never stop.” She looked hopeful. “I know she’s a terrible mess, but can you *do* anything with her?”

Mademoiselle Geraldine gave a tight smile. “What do you say to a probationary period? We’ll return her in time for that coming-out ball of yours in a few months and see how she gets on until then?”

“Oh, Mademoiselle Geraldine, how perfectly topping!” Sophronia’s mother clasped her hands delightedly. “Isn’t this thrilling, Sophronia? You’re going to finishing school!”

“But I don’t *want* to go to finishing school!” Sophronia couldn’t help the petulance in her voice as visions of parasol training danced through her

head.

“Don’t be like that, darling. It will be very exciting.”

Sophronia grappled for recourse. “But she threw a pillow at me!”

“Oh, Sophronia, don’t tell fibs—you know how unhappy that makes me.”

Sophronia gawped, swiveling her gaze back and forth between her now-animated mother and the crowlike stranger.

“How soon can she be made ready?” Mademoiselle Geraldine wanted to know.

Sophronia’s mother started. “You wish to take her away *now*?”

“I am here, am I not? Why waste the trip?”

“I didn’t think it would be so soon. We must shop for new dresses, a warmer coat. What about her lesson books?”

“Oh, you can send all *that* along later. I shall provide you with a list of required items. She’ll be perfectly fine for the time being. A resourceful girl, I suspect.”

“Well, if you think it best.”

“I do.”

Sophronia was not accustomed to seeing her mother railroaded so effectively. “But Mumsy!”

“If Mademoiselle Geraldine thinks it best, then you had better hop to it, young lady. Go change into your good blue dress and your Sunday hat. I’ll have one of the maids pack your necessities. May we have half an hour, mademoiselle?”

“Of course. Perhaps I will take a little tour of the grounds while you organize? To stretch my legs before the drive.”

“Please do. Come along, Sophronia, we have much to do.”

Frustrated and out of sorts, Sophronia trailed after her mother.

Accordingly, she was given an old portmanteau from the attic, three hatboxes, and a carpetbag. With barely enough time to ensure a nibble for the drive—to goodness knows where, at a distance of goodness knows how far—Sophronia found herself being shoved hastily into a carriage. Her mother kissed her on the forehead and made a show of fussing. “My little girl, all grown up and leaving to become a lady!” And that, as they say, was that.

Sophronia might have hoped for a grand send-off with all her siblings

and half the mechanical retainers waving tearstained handkerchiefs. But her younger brothers were exploring the farm, her older ones were away at Eton, her sisters were busy with fripperies or marriages—possibly one and the same—and the mechanicals were trundling about their daily tasks. She thought she spotted Roger, the stable lad, waving his cap from the hayloft, but apart from that, even her mother gave only a perfunctory waggle of her fingertips before returning to the house.

Beware Flywaymen, for They Are Ill-dressed and Ill-mannered

The carriage was amazing, outfitted with the latest in automated roof removal, retractable footstool, and collapsible tea caddy. It was a hired transport but decked out like a private conveyance, with walls of midnight-blue quilted velvet to reduce road noise, and gold-fringed blankets to ward off the chill.

Sophronia barely had time to take it all in before Mademoiselle Geraldine banged the ceiling with the handle of her parasol and they lurched forward.

More startling than the decoration was the fact that the carriage was already occupied—by two other students. They had, apparently, been sitting patiently the entire time Mademoiselle Geraldine took tea and Sophronia fell out of dumbwaiters and packed all her worldly goods into a portmanteau.

Directly across from her sat a bright-eyed, lively looking young lady, a little younger than Sophronia, with masses of honey-colored hair and a round porcelain face. She wore an enormous gilt and red glass brooch pinned to her bright red dress. The combination of the hair, the jewelry, and the dress made her look quite the scandal, as though she were in training to become a lady of the night. Sophronia was duly impressed.

“Oh, goodness!” said she to Sophronia, as though Sophronia’s appearance in the cab were the most delightful thing to happen all day.

Which, for one left to sit idle in a carriage with no distraction or entertainment, it might well have been.

“How do you do?” said Sophronia.

“How do you do? Isn’t this a spiffing day? Really, quite spiffing. I’m Dimity. Who are you?”

“Sophronia.”

“Is that all?”

“What, isn’t it enough?”

“Oh, well, I mean to say, I’m Dimity Ann Plumleigh-Teignmott, actually, in full.”

“Sophronia Angelina Temminnick.”

“Gosh, that’s a mouthful.”

“It is? I suppose so.” *As though Dimity Ann Plumleigh-Teignmott were a nice easy sort of name.* Sophronia dragged her eyes away from the girl to examine the final occupant of the carriage. It was difficult to make out what kind of creature lurked under the oversized bowler and oiled greatcoat. But, if pressed, she would have said it was some species of grubby boy. He had spectacles that were very thick, a brow that was very creased, and a large dusty book occupying the entirety of his lap and attention.

“What’s that?” she asked the girl, wrinkling her nose.

“Oh, that? That’s just Pillover.”

“And what’s a pillover, when it’s at home?”

“My little brother.”

“Ah, I commiserate. I have several of my own. Dashed inconvenient, brothers.” Sophronia nodded, perfectly understanding the outlandish hat and coat.

Pillover glanced up from behind his spectacles and issued them both a *look*. He seemed a few years younger than his sister, who was, Sophronia guessed, about thirteen.

“He’s slated for Bunson’s.”

“For what?”

“Bunson and Lacroix’s Boys’ Polytechnique. You know, the other school?”

Sophronia, who had no idea what Dimity was talking about, pretended to follow out of politeness.

The girl prattled on. She seemed to be a bit of a prattler. Sophronia was

comfortable with this after living with her own family. They were big talkers, but with a lot less interesting things to say than Dimity. “Mummy and Daddy want him to be an evil genius, but he has his heart set on Latin verse. Don’t you, Pill?”

The boy gave his sister a nasty stare.

“Pillover is terribly bad at being bad, if you take my meaning. Our daddy is a founding member of the Death Weasel Confederacy, and Mummy is a kitchen chemist with questionable intent, but poor Pillover can’t even bring himself to murder ants with his Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification. Can you, Pill?”

Sophronia felt as though she was progressively losing the thread of the conversation. “Death Weasel Confederacy?”

Dimity nodded, curls bobbing. “I know—can you countenance it? I tend to look on the bright side; at least Daddy’s not a Pickleman.”

Sophronia’s eyes popped. “Uh, oh yes, *rather*.” *Pickleman? What in aether is a Pickleman?*

“But Pill here is a sad disappointment to poor old Daddy.”

The boy in question put down his book, clearly driven to defend himself. “I made the articulated hassock that moved when someone went to sit on it. And there was that custard pot that never got cool enough for the pudding to set.”

Dimity provided parenthetical information against this defense. “The hassock always ended up moving forward helpfully. And Cook simply used the Custard Pot of Iniquity for keeping her buns warm.”

“Oh, I say. That’s not on. Telling family secrets like that!”

“Face it, Pill, you’re disappointingly *good*.”

“Oh, I like that! And you’re so evil? Why, you want to get married and be a *lady*. Who ever heard of such a thing in our family? At least I try.”

“Well, finishing school should help with being a lady. Shouldn’t it?” At least this was something Sophronia knew about.

The boy snorted derisively. “Not half. Not *this* finishing school. Wrong kind of finishing altogether. Or should I say right kind, but only on the surface? I’m sure you follow.” Pillover made a funny little leer at Sophronia, then, seeming to have embarrassed himself, resumed his book.

“What could he possibly be implying?” Sophronia looked to Dimity to explain her brother’s behavior.

“You mean, you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Oh my goodness. You’re a *covert recruit*? No family connection at all? I knew they took them, of course, but I didn’t think I would get to meet one. How charming! Have you been under surveillance? I heard they do that sometimes.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine interceded at that juncture. “That’s enough of *that*, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle Geraldine.”

The headmistress went back to ignoring them.

“So where are we traveling to?” Sophronia asked, figuring that was a safe question, since they clearly weren’t allowed to talk about the school itself.

“You don’t even know that much?” Dimity’s tone was full of pity. “Why, to Mademoiselle Geraldine’s Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality.”

Sophronia shook her head. “No, I mean, where is the location of this school?”

“Well, no one knows *exactly*, but to the south. Dartmoor, or somewhere around there.”

“Why so mysterious?”

Dimity shook her head, curls flying. “Oh, no, you see, I’m not meaning to be. It isn’t, you understand, at a fixed location.”

“What isn’t?”

“The academy.”

Sophronia imagined a building, filled with shrieking girls, scooting about the moor on tracks, like some massive, overexcited mechanical. “The school is mobile? What, on hundreds of tiny little legs?”

“Legs? Well, yes, moving, only not on legs. I think it’s, *you* know.” Dimity tilted her head back and looked to the ceiling.

Sophronia was about to inquire further when a terrific jolt shook them where they sat and the carriage came to a stop so abruptly that it pitched Dimity on top of Sophronia, and Pillover on top of Mademoiselle Geraldine.

Mademoiselle Geraldine screamed, probably upset by extended contact with Pillover’s grimy coat, and flapped her arms and legs to get the boy off.

Sophronia and Dimity untangled themselves, giggling.

Pillover extracted himself from the headmistress with remarkable dignity for a boy of his age and dress and retrieved his bowler from the floor.

“What on earth is going on?” Mademoiselle Geraldine banged on the ceiling of the cab with her parasol. “Coachman? Coachman!”

The carriage remained still. Or at least it didn’t appear to want to move *forward*. Every so often it would bob *upward*, as though it were afloat on the open sea.

The door to the carriage was yanked open to reveal not the coachman, but a bizarre-looking gentleman. He was dressed for the hunt in tweed jodhpurs, boots, red jacket, and riding hat, but he also wore goggles, with a long scarf of the type donned by arctic explorers wrapped around the lower part of his face.

The carriage lurched again. One of the horses neighed in alarm.

The strange man had a massive brass onion pinned to his cravat and was pointing a wicked-looking pistol at the occupants of the carriage. Sophronia’s eyes, once caught by the weapon, remained fixed upon it. Never before had she come face-to-face with an actual gun. She was shocked. *Why, that thing could go off. Someone could get hurt!*

“Highwaymen!” squeaked Pillover.

“No,” corrected Mademoiselle Geraldine, her teeth gritted. “Worse: *flywaymen*.” There was something in her tone, felt Sophronia, that suggested she was not surprised. Sophronia was instantly suspicious of both Mademoiselle Geraldine and the flywayman.

The headmistress batted her long eyelashes. “Why, sir, what could you possibly want from us? I’m simply a headmistress transporting these children to their final destination.”

Laying it on a bit thick, isn’t she? thought Sophronia.

“We have nothing of great value. We—”

The flywayman interrupted Mademoiselle Geraldine. “Silence. We know perfectly well what you’ve got those pretty little mitts on. Hand over the prototype.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you are on about.” The headmistress’s trembling smile was well executed, but apparently not convincing.

“’Course you do. Where is it?”

Mademoiselle Geraldine shook her head, eyelashes lowered prettily.

“Well, perhaps we’ll simply have a look for ourselves.”

The man stuck his head, briefly, back out the door and yelled something indistinguishable up to the sky.

There came a thump on the top of the carriage. Sophronia and the others could do nothing but watch, mutely, as their trunks, bags, and hatboxes were thrown from the roof to crash to the ground. There they fell open, littering the dusty road with clothing, hats, and shoes.

Two more flywaymen, dressed much like their leader, jumped down after and began rifling through the spilled contents. Whatever they were looking for appeared to be relatively small, as every piece of luggage—no matter what the size—had to be emptied. One of the men even used a knife to slash the bottoms of the trunks, searching for hidden pockets.

This was all highly embarrassing, to have one’s private possessions strewn about in public! Sophronia was particularly mortified that Pillover could see all her underthings—*a stranger, and a boy!* She also noted that Mademoiselle Geraldine’s trunks included some very salacious night garments. Why, there was a nightgown of purple flannel. *Imagine that!*

The flywaymen’s movements became increasingly frenzied. Their leader, while still guarding the occupants of the carriage, glanced frequently behind him at the activity in the road.

After a quarter of an hour, the man’s hand, the one holding the gun, began shaking from fatigue.

“Where is it?” he hissed at Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“I told you, young man, you will not find it here. Whatever *it* is.” She tossed her head. *Actually tossed it!*

“Impossible. We know you have it. You *must* have it!”

The headmistress looked off to the far distant horizon, nose elevated. “Your information would appear to be faulty.”

“Come with me. You, children, stay here.” The man dragged Mademoiselle Geraldine from the carriage. The headmistress struggled briefly, but finding the man’s strength superior to her own, she subsided.

“Where’s the coachman?” Sophronia hissed to Dimity and Pillover.

“Probably overcome by physical assault,” said Dimity.

“Or dead,” added Pillover.

“How’d they get to us? I didn’t hear any horses or anything.”

Pillover pointed up. “Sky highwaymen. Haven’t you heard of them?”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t think they *actually* existed.”

Pillover shrugged.

“Must have been hired by someone,” Dimity said. “What do you think the prototype is for?”

“Does it matter?” her brother asked.

“You think she actually has it?” Sophronia wondered.

Pillover looked at Sophronia with something like pity in his dark eyes. “Of course she has it. Question is, did she hide it well enough?”

“Or did she make a copy?” added Dimity.

“Is it safe to let them think they’ve won?”

“And was she thinking that far ahead?”

Sophronia interrupted their speculation. “That’s a lot of questions.”

They heard Mademoiselle Geraldine say something sharp to the men rifling through the luggage. All three looked out the open door to see what would happen next. The flywayman with the gun struck the headmistress across the face with his free hand.

“Oh, dear,” said Sophronia. “Violence.” She suppressed panic and a strange urge to giggle. She’d never before seen a grown man actually hit a woman.

Dimity looked slightly green.

Pillover’s small face became drawn behind his round spectacles. “I don’t think she planned for *this*.”

His assessment seemed correct, for Mademoiselle Geraldine proceeded to have a bout of hysterics, culminating in a very dramatic faint in the middle of the road.

“Quite the performance. My sister Petunia once acted like that over a mouse.”

“You think she’s shamming?” Dimity was inclined to be impressed.

“Shamming or not, she seems to have hung us out to dry.” Sophronia pursed her lips. *I don’t want to go to finishing school, but I don’t exactly want to be kidnapped by flywaymen either.*

The carriage lurched up again.

Sophronia looked at the ceiling. The flywaymen’s transport must be tied to the luggage rails above. She put two and two together: the flywayman’s goggles plus his onion-shaped pin. *Balloon transport*. At which point

Sophronia decided she had better do something about their predicament. “We need to cut the balloon’s ties to the carriage and get to the driver’s box and take command of the horses. Once we get moving, can we outrun them?”

Pillover nodded. “No scientist has figured out how to make air transport move as quickly as ground. Although there *were* some interesting dirigible prototypes in last month’s *Junior Guide to Scientific Advancements and Amoral Superiority*. Something about utilizing the aether currents, but nothing on balloons, so—”

Dimity interrupted her brother. “Yes, thank you, Pill.” Clearly, prattling was a family trait even Pillover was prone to indulge in sometimes.

“So?” said Sophronia. “Resources. What do you two have?”

Pillover emptied the pockets of his oversized greatcoat: some pine-sap gum, a monocle on a stick—*the Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification, perhaps?*—and a long piece of ribbon that probably started life in his sister’s hair. Dimity produced a box of sandwiches, a wooden spoon, and a knitted stuffed octopus out of the small covered basket at her feet. All Sophronia had was the piece of sponge she’d swiped at tea and stashed in her apron, now sadly crushed.

She split it into three and they ate the cake and thought hard.

None of the enemy paid them any mind. The three flywaymen had given up demolishing the luggage and now stood about arguing. Mademoiselle Geraldine was still firmly fainted.

“No time like the present,” said Sophronia, grabbing Pillover’s magnification lens. She climbed out of the small window of the carriage, the one on the side facing away from the flywaymen.

Carriages, as it turned out, were a whole lot easier to climb than dumbwaiters. Sophronia hoisted herself onto the top of the cab, unseen by the men below. There she found a large and colorful airdinghy tied to the roof. It wasn’t made of one balloon, but four, each attached to a corner of a passenger basket about the size of a small rowboat. In the center of the basket sprouted up a mast, higher than the balloons, with a sail unfurled. Steering propellers were suspended below. These were moving slightly, hovering directly above Sophronia’s head as she crawled across the carriage roof. They looked quite sharp. Keeping an eye on them, she made her way over to the mooring point.

The rope was tied firmly about the luggage rail and impossible to work loose.

Sophronia pulled out Pillover's magnification lens and, angling it to catch the sun, began to burn through the rope. The acrid smell of scalded fiber permeated the air, but her activities remained unobserved. It seemed to take forever, but eventually the rope burned away to a point where Sophronia could break it. The airdinghy bobbed up, caught a slight breeze, and drifted away.

Without pausing to survey the effects of her handiwork, Sophronia crawled over and lowered herself down onto the driver's box. The coachman lay slumped to one side. There was a large red mark on his forehead. She relieved him of the reins and clucked the horses into motion. She was perfectly well aware of how inappropriate it was for a young lady of fourteen to drive a coach, but circumstances sometimes called for extreme measures.

At that point, the flywaymen noticed what was happening and began shouting at her. The leader shot his gun rather ineffectually into a nearby tree. Another took off after the airdinghy, chasing it on the ground. The third began running toward her.

Sophronia whipped the horses up and set them a brisk canter. The cab behind her swayed alarmingly. It might be the latest design, but it was not meant for such a frantic pace. She gave the horses their heads for a few minutes before drawing them back to a trot. When she came upon a junction wide enough, she turned the carriage about and pulled up. She jumped down and stuck her head inside the cab.

Pillover and Dimity stared with wide, awed eyes back at her.

"All righty, then?"

"Tremendous," said Dimity.

"What kind of *girl* are you?" grumbled Pillover, looking rather yellow about the gills.

"Now I see why you were recruited," added Dimity. "I'm surprised they left it until you were so old."

Sophronia blushed. No one had ever praised her for such activities before. Nor had anyone looked upon her as *old*. It was quite the honor.

"How on earth do you know how to drive a carriage?" Pillover asked, as though this were some kind of personal affront.

Sophronia grinned. “I spend a lot of time in stables.”

“Nice-looking stable boys?” suggested Dimity.

Sophronia gave her an arch look. “So what now—go back for the headmistress?”

“But we’re safe, aren’t we?” Pillover looked alarmed by the idea. “Is she really worth it?”

“It *is* the polite thing to do. Hardly fair to abandon her among criminals,” pointed out his sister.

“Plus the coachman is insensible. And he’s the only other one who knows where we are heading.” Sophronia was all for logic as well as manners.

“But they have guns,” replied Pillover, also logically.

Sophronia considered this. “True.” She looked at Dimity. “Mademoiselle Geraldine—how useful do you think she is?”

Dimity frowned. “Did she fib with you?”

Sophronia nodded.

“I’m not convinced she can be relied upon to follow any kind of plan; you know how adults are. However, we must do something.”

“Did I mention the guns?”

“Oh, stuff it, Pill.” Dimity dismissed her brother, turning her attention entirely on Sophronia. “What do you suggest?”

“If I go in quick, could you and Mr. Pillover tie yourselves down and see if you can’t simply grab her off the road?”

“Remember, ladies, the guns?” Pillover repeated.

Dimity was nodding. “It’ll require both me and Pill. Mademoiselle Geraldine is slim, but not *that* slim.”

Pillover would not let up. “What about the whole shooting at us part of the equation?”

Sophronia and Dimity said together, “Stuff it, Pill.”

“We don’t have any rope.”

Sophronia dangled the long ribbon from Pillover’s pocket. Dimity firmed up her mouth, grabbed it, nodded her head sharply, and went to work.

Sophronia shut the cab door and climbed back up onto the driver’s box.

The coachman was blinking blearily and clutching his head.

“Hold on, sir,” suggested Sophronia. “It’s about to get a mite bumpy.”

“What? Who are you?” was all he managed to say before the young lady in the blue dress grabbed up the reins of his horses and whipped them into a fast trot.

They dashed back toward the pile of clothing and luggage in the middle of the roadway. Mademoiselle Geraldine now stood a short distance away from the head flywayman, wailing tragically over one of the hatboxes. The other two men had vanished.

Seeing the carriage charging toward him, the flywayman took aim and fired.

The bullet whined over Sophronia’s head. She thought dark insults at the man—slander she’d learned from Roger, the stable lad.

The coachman, after a yell of horror, hunkered down. Luckily, he did not try to wrest the reins away from Sophronia. He probably thought he was in the midst of a bad dream.

She slurred the carriage around, bringing it up alongside the headmistress and pulling back on the reins at the same time. On cue, the cab door banged open and four little hands scrabbled for purchase on the black lace of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s fabulous dress. They yanked. Something tore. Mademoiselle Geraldine squealed and fell forward and into the carriage. Her legs dangled.

The flywayman dropped his gun and dove for Mademoiselle Geraldine. The headmistress dropped her pathetic act and kicked frantically, eventually losing her shoes, but also the flywayman’s grip. He fell to the road, clutching to his chest a pair of black satin slippers.

Sophronia turned to face forward, flashing the whip. The horses hardly needed the encouragement, as they were already terrified by the gunfire and the erratic driving methods of their new coachgirl. They sprang into a gallop.

How Not to Make Introductions

The coachman finally regained his senses, realizing this was not some nightmare. There really was a fourteen-year-old girl with mousy hair and a serious expression driving his carriage. He yanked the reins away from Sophronia and pulled the horses up short. They hung their heads, sides heaving.

"Well, then," said Sophronia to the coachman, sticking her nose in the air. She jumped down. A series of cries and wails emanated from inside the carriage. She opened the door to find Pillover sitting and reading his book, while his sister lay in a crumpled heap on the floor.

The boy gestured with his chin at Dimity. "She was shot." He sounded remarkably unconcerned for a brother with any degree of affection for his sibling.

"Good lord!" Sophronia climbed in to see to her new friend's health. The bullet had grazed Dimity's shoulder. It had ripped her dress and left a partly burned gash behind, but didn't look all that bad.

Sophronia checked to make certain Dimity had no other injuries. Then she sat back on her heels. "Is that all? I've had worse scrapes from drinking tea. Why has she come over all crumpled?"

Pillover rolled his eyes. "Faints at the sight of blood, our Dimity. Always has. Weak nerves, Father says. It doesn't even have to be *her* blood."

Sophronia snorted.

"Exactly. And the smelling salts were in her suitcase. Which is now

some distance behind us. Leave her be. She'll come 'round eventually."

Sophronia turned her attention to the source of the wails. "What's wrong with her, then?" *Is Mademoiselle Geraldine also injured?* The headmistress was curled into a ball, hands covering her face, whimpering.

Pillover was as disgusted with the headmistress as he was with his sister. "She's been like that ever since we pulled her inside. Nothing damaged except her brain, so far as I can determine."

Sophronia looked closer and caught the headmistress watching them slyly from behind her hands. She was shamming. But why? *So she doesn't have to explain anything? Such a peculiar woman.*

It was then that Sophronia noticed that Pillover was looking unwell behind his sneer.

She turned her full attention on the boy. "And are *you* quite all right, Mr. Pillover?"

"I'm not a very good traveler at the best of times, Miss Sophronia. You might have taken that last half mile a little smoother."

Sophronia tried to hide a smile. "I might. But what pleasure would there be in that?"

"Oh, wonderful," said Pillover. "You're one of *those* kinds of girls."

Sophronia narrowed her eyes. "You could ride on the box next to the coachman. Fresh air would do you a world of good."

Pillover looked most offended. "Outside, like a peasant? I think not."

Sophronia shrugged. "Suited me."

Pillover gave her a look that suggested that her valiant rescue was no excuse and that she was, in fact, now quite low-class in his eyes.

Sophronia returned her attention to the whimpering headmistress. "What are we going to do about her?" And then, more directly, "You're not fooling anyone, you realize?"

Pillover evidently had been fooled. "She's shamming? Well, there's nothing we can do about her. The coachman knows where to go. He can get us to Bunson's. Someone there will know what to do."

Sophronia nodded and stuck her head out the carriage window. "Coachman?"

"Yes, little miss?" The man looked generally upset with life.

"You can drive us on to this Bunson's locale, can't you?"

"Yes, little miss. I know the school. But I'm not convinced I intend to

continue on, now. Never been held up by flywaymen afore."

Blast it. How would Mumsy handle this? Sophronia looked the coachman full in the face and straightened her spine as stiff as she could. "You will if you wish to be paid. Keep a decent pace and an eye to the sky and it shouldn't happen again." The moment she said it, Sophronia became completely shocked by her own daring. She was also mildly impressed by how imperious she sounded.

So was the coachman, apparently, because he resumed his post without another word and set the horses a sedate trot.

Pillover glanced over the top of his glasses. "You do that rather well, don't you?"

"What?"

"Order other people around. I've not yet got the way of it myself."

Sophronia thought Pillover was, regardless, doing pretty well at snobbery, for a grubby boy. She was about to say something of the kind when Mademoiselle Geraldine's whimpering escalated.

"Oh, do stop it and explain yourself," Sophronia ordered, feeling she was on an autocratic streak.

Much to her surprise, the headmistress listened, transforming her simulated whimpering into outright ire, directed at Sophronia. "I didn't attend for this, you understand. Easy assignment, they said." Sophronia noted with interest that Mademoiselle Geraldine had lost her French accent. "Nothing to it but improvisational theatrics. Some on-point assessment of new candidates. Simply act older. Put on a bit of an accent and a pretty dress. Such an easy finishing. Others should be so lucky. You're certain to make it through. But no. Oh, no. I had to have a combination retrieval and recruitment undertaking with an unexpected attack from unknown counterintelligencer elements, and no second. How dare they send me on without a second? Me! I mean, did I ask for this? I didn't ask for this. Who needs active status? I don't need active status. This is ridiculous!" She seemed to be progressively building herself up to sublime self-righteousness.

Sophronia felt that there was something else undercutting the flood of words. "Headmistress, is there nothing we can do for you? You seem upset."

"Upset? Of course I'm upset! And don't call me headmistress.

Headmistress, my ruddy arse."

Sophronia gasped at the shocking word. *Now, that's taking matters too far!*

Mademoiselle Geraldine sat up straight and glared, as though Sophronia were responsible for everything bad in the world. "My face hurts, my dress is in tatters, and I have no slippers!" This last and deepest offense was uttered in a positive wail.

"Then you're not our headmistress?"

"How could I be? I'm only seventeen years old. You can't possibly think I'm the headmistress of a finishing school. You're not that naive."

"But isn't that what we were meant to think?"

"I didn't think about you at all," muttered Pillover, returning to his book.

"Who *are* you, then?" asked Sophronia.

"I'm Miss Monique de Pelouse!" She paused, as though expecting the name to produce some sign of recognition.

Sophronia merely gave her a blank look. "So this begs the question: where is the *real* Mademoiselle Geraldine?"

"Oh"—Monique waved a hand in the air and sniffed—"she never leaves much anymore, and she's useless when she does. They always send impersonators."

"They do?"

"Of course they do. It's easier, and it's a good way to finish."

"And who is *they*?"

"Why, the teachers, of course. But we were talking about me and my problems."

Sophronia looked Monique up and down gravely. "I don't think we're going to solve those in the space of one carriage ride."

Pillover *tut-tut*ted at her from behind his book—but there was clear amusement in the reprimand.

Monique sneered. "Who do you think you are? *Covert recruit.* You're not that special. You're not that good. Proud of yourself and your little carriage rescue, are you? Well, I didn't need your help! I'm a top-level student, on my finishing assignment. Ordered to retrieve three useless *children*."

Pillover's voice emanated from behind his tome. "I hardly think that was all."

“Of course it wasn’t *all*,” Monique snapped. “I had the prototype to collect as well, now didn’t I?”

Pillover took interest at last. “The one the flywaymen were after?”

Sophronia asked, “What’s it a prototype *of*?”

“Don’t be daft. I don’t know *that*.”

“Do you think you might at some point tell me what *finishing* actually means?” Sophronia was getting more and more curious about the particulars of this finishing school. It seemed Mumsy might have been misled as to the nature of the establishment.

“No.” Monique gave her a decidedly nasty glare and then turned her attention out the carriage window.

Sophronia wasn’t certain what she’d done to incur such loathing. *Should have left her with the flywaymen.* She looked at Pillover, who ignored her. So she sighed and sat back, frustrated. After a moment’s consideration, she switched to the spot next to Pillover and attempted to read over his shoulder, ignoring his faintly goaty smell. All boys smelled of goat. So they passed the rest of the ride, until the carriage pulled into the sleepy little town of Swiffle-on-Exe.

As they ratted to a halt, Dimity blinked awake. “Ow. What? Did I fall asleep?”

“No, you fainted. Blood,” explained her brother tersely.

“Oh, did I? Pardon.” Dimity glanced down at her wounded shoulder. “Oh!” Her eyes began to roll back into her head.

Sophronia quickly leaned forward and clapped her hand over the injury. “None of that, now!”

Dimity refocused on her. “Ouch. Uh, perhaps we could tie something over it?”

“Good plan. Close your eyes.” Sophronia worked the long hair ribbon loose from the grip rail inside the carriage door and wrapped it around Dimity’s shoulder.

“Oh, I do wish I were more like Mummy. She’s terribly fearsome. Wish I looked more like her, as well. That would help with everything.” Dimity sat up.

“Why? What does she look like?”

“More like Pillover than me.”

Sophronia, who had seen very little of Pillover’s appearance, outside of

his massive outer garments, could only say, “Oh?”

“You know, *dark* and *brooding*. I should dearly love to be *dark* and *brooding*. It’s so romantic and fortune-teller-like. I couldn’t brood if my life depended on it.”

“Well, the ribbon around your shoulder makes for a certain fortune-telling appeal.”

“Oh, does it? Splendid. You know, Sophronia, *you* could probably do it if you put your mind to it.”

“Do what?”

“Be *dark* and *brooding*.”

Sophronia, with middling brown hair and moderately green eyes set in a freckled face, would hardly have described herself as brooding. Or dark, for that matter.

Dimity’s attention, lightning fast, shifted to a new topic. “Where are we?”

“Bunson’s, finally,” said Pillover, snapping his book shut. He made a show of organizing for arrival. Given that he no longer had any luggage, this was rather like the action of a mechanical without instructions, trundling idly in circles until he ran out of steam.

The carriage door was opened by a stiff domestic mechanical of some advanced outdoor nature.

“What is that?” gasped Sophronia. She’d never seen anything to equal the monstrosity. It was taller than Frowbritcher and conically shaped, with a wheelbarrow attached to its back. Where a face facsimile should be was a confusion of gears and cogs, like the back of a clock.

“Porter mechanical.” Pillover stood, clutching his literary tome, and jumped down. “You two coming?” he asked, without turning to see.

“Where is your luggage, young sir?” asked the mechanical. Its voice was louder and brassier than Frowbritcher’s. It wore a gray cap, backward, and a brass octopus pin on a cloth cravat around its neck. *That’s too bizarre.* Sophronia had never seen a mechanical wear clothing before.

Pillover answered. “Oh, about ten miles back in the middle of the road.”

“Sir?” The porter rocked side to side in confusion. It was riding on a set of rails, like a very small train.

Sophronia climbed out of the carriage to get a closer look, wondering if she could take the porter apart.

Dimity followed.

The mechanical's attention instantly shifted to them.

"No females, young sir." It made a whirring, hissing noise and ejected a puff of steam from below its cravat. The material fluttered up against its clockwork face and then flopped back down.

Pillover turned back. "What?"

"No females allowed, young sir." The porter puffed again. *Flap*, *flap*, went the cravat.

"Oh, those aren't females. They're only girls. They're slated for the finishing academy."

"They read as females, young sir."

"Oh, I say. Don't be difficult."

Sophronia took the diplomatic route. "We need to speak with an authority. Our carriage was attacked and our guardian is overset."

"No females!" The porter mechanical was quite firm on this. Its chest panel moved aside to reveal some kind of weapon, too large to be a gun.

As Sophronia stood, transfixed, it sparked and then *whooshed* to life, hurling blue flames that got close enough to singe Dimity's hair.

The girls dove back inside the cab, and the coachman, who was not having any more tomfoolery on his watch, drove the carriage away at once. The flame-throwing porter did not follow them.

The carriage halted outside the school grounds. Sophronia pressed her nose against the glass above the cab door and looked out. Bunson's was massive, but oddly hodgepodge—not like a respectable educational facility at all. A few of its towers were square, but others were round; some were old, others new; and some were positively *foreign* looking. There were wires stretching between the towers, and sticks jutting outward with netting dangling off their ends. An orange glow lit up various windows, here and there puffs of steam emanated forth, and one large smokestack belched plumes of black smoke up into the sky.

Sophronia looked at Dimity. "What now?"

"Well, my brother's no good. He'll have forgotten about us the moment he got inside."

"It's starting to get dark." Sophronia turned to their erstwhile headmistress. "She's simply going to have to do her job."

Dimity took a deep breath, sat down on the bench next to Monique, and

shook the older girl's arm.

"What do *you* want?"

"We don't know the academy's location, and neither does the driver."

Monique de Pelouse said nothing.

Sophronia crossed her arms and glared at the older girl. Dimity looked back and forth between the two for a moment, then crossed her arms and glared as well. Though perhaps not quite so fiercely.

Finally, Monique relented. "Oh, very *well*!" She banged on the roof with her parasol handle. The cab door opened and the coachman stuck his head in.

Monique said, "Take Shrubbery Lane to the Nib and Crinkle Pub, turn left, and follow the goat path behind the hedge. After an hour, the path ends in a thicket of trees. Go around to the right and then I shall issue further instructions. And hurry. We must beat the sunset or we'll never spot it."

"But madam, that's straight out onto the moor."

"Of course it is. What could possibly have made you think we'd stop at the edge?"

"There are stories about Dartmoor. People get lost in the mist and never return. Or are eaten by werewolves. Or are taken by vampires. Or are murdered by flywaymen."

At which juncture Monique proved she could do "commanding" far better than Sophronia. "Stop arguing, my man. You heard what I said about the sun."

Looking very uncomfortable, the put-upon coachman resumed his place. The tired horses started up once more.

At first, everything seemed ordinary, but a few minutes up the goat path the carriage started to sway, buffeted by the most intense gusts of wind Sophronia had ever felt. She pressed her face against the window. Endless rolling grassland stretched around them, brown after a summer's heat, waving in the wind. The moor was mist-shrouded in the distance. Here and there a coppice of trees or a small winding spring disturbed the monotony with a bright splash of green.

"Is this all?" Sophronia was dubious.

Dimity shrugged. "Windy."

"Don't let it fool you," Monique said with an unkind smile. "This is the *only* nice bit. Soon enough the rocks will sprout up like broken bones, and

the mist rises so fast you can’t see where you’re going or where you’ve been.”

Sophronia was not spooked. “You think you can scare me with doomy talk? I’ve older sisters, I’ll have you know.”

Monique gave her a dirty look before rapping on the carriage roof again and issuing a new set of directions.

The carriage turned, this time following some invisible path out onto the heath. The mist began closing in around them, or they were moving into it—hard to tell which.

Sophronia actually began to feel a tiny bit of dread in the pit of her stomach. *What if there really are werewolves roaming the moor?*

And then, there it was. The mist broke. The last rays of the sun cast a long shadow out of the carriage and lit up Mademoiselle Geraldine’s Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. And no, the school wasn’t dashing around the moor on hundreds of tiny little legs. It was bobbing above it in chubby floating majesty.

THE CORRECT CONFIGURATION OF A FINISHING SCHOOL

My goodness," said Sophronia. "It looks like a caterpillar that has overeaten."

And it did. It wasn't so much a dirigible as three dirigibles mashed together to form one long chain of oblong, inflated balloons. Below them dangled a multilevel series of decks, most open to the air, but some closed off, with windows reflecting back the dying sun. At the back, a colossal set of propellers churned slowly, and above them billowed a massive sail—probably more for guidance than propulsion. A great quantity of steam wafted out from below the lower back decks, floating away to join the mist as if responsible for creating it. Black smoke puffed sedately out of three tall smokestacks.

Sophronia was enchanted. It was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen, and entirely unlike any of the finishing schools she had ever heard of, which were mostly—according to her sisters—inside castles in Switzerland. She did not, however, want to admit to being enchanted, as this seemed childish, so instead, she said casually, "It's much bigger than I expected."

"It's very high up, isn't it?" added Dimity nervously.

As the carriage drew closer, Sophronia realized that the floating academy was moving much faster than she had initially thought. It was probably riding the stiff wind that seemed to rush over Dartmoor constantly, tilting small trees into lopsidedness. Just when she thought they might

actually catch it, the horses screamed in terror and the carriage jerked to a stop.

The door burst open. A young man stood before them. He was a tall, swarthy fellow of the type that Petunia would swoon over; rakishly handsome in a floppy way. He was wearing a black silk top hat and a greatcoat that covered him from neck to ankle. *Papa would call him a "young blunt" in a disgusted tone of voice.* Sophronia was briefly afraid that this was some new form of flywayman—except that he wore no goggles and was grinning at them.

"Ladies!"

Monique colored becomingly. "Captain."

"Winds are fierce this evening. Can't float down for a pickup. You ladies will have to wait until after sunset, then I'll give you a lift."

"Oh." Monique's delicate little nose wrinkled. "Must we?"

The young man's cheerful expression didn't falter under the weight of her dissatisfaction. "Yes."

"Oh, very well." Monique gave the man her hand and he helped her down.

He did not turn to accompany her, instead looking inquiringly at Dimity and Sophronia. "Ladies. No time like the present."

Dimity gathered up her little basket, also blushing furiously, and put her hand into the man's large one.

He helped her down and returned for Sophronia. "Miss?"

Sophronia busily checked the cab for any forgotten items.

The young man observed this with a twinkle in his dark eyes. "Cautious girl."

Sophronia didn't dignify that with a reply. She hadn't pinpointed the particulars yet, but there was something odd about this man, aside from his being adorable.

Outside, the wind was biting, and the great airship was even more impressive. The horses were restless, rolling their eyes and straining against their traces. The coachman fought to hold them. There seemed to be no reason for their panic. The young man strode forward to pay the driver. This only terrified the animals further. The coachman managed to take possession of his fare and keep hold of the reins, but only by dint of real skill. Then he turned his steeds around and let them have their way,

careening across the heath at a breakneck speed.

Dimity sidled up to Sophronia and whispered, “Isn’t he simply scrumptious?”

Sophronia pretended obtuseness. “The coachman?”

“No, silly. Him!” Dimity tilted her head toward their new escort.

“He’s a little old, don’t you feel?”

Dimity considered the age of the young man. He was, perhaps, one-and-twenty. “Well, I suppose. But Monique doesn’t believe so. Look at her flirting! Shameless.”

The man and Monique were discussing the lack of luggage. With animated hand gestures, Monique described its loss, their recent attack, and their subsequent escape. She downplayed Sophronia’s part and accentuated her own. Sophronia would have defended herself, but there was something about the way Monique told the story that was about more than ego.

“She’s hiding something. Has been all along—and not only her real identity.”

“A brain?” Dimity suggested.

“And *he* isn’t wearing any shoes.”

“Oh, I say! You’re right. How peculiar.”

“And the horses were afraid of him. Every time he got close, they shied.”

“But why?”

“Perhaps they have equine standards—an abhorrence of bare feet.”

Dimity giggled.

The man, apparently tired of Monique’s tales, came to join them.

The older girl trailed behind him and finally remembered her manners. “Girls, this is Captain Niall.”

Dimity bobbed a curtsy. “Captain.”

Sophronia followed suit a second later with a much less tidy curtsy and a much less pleasant “Captain.”

Monique said, “Miss Dimity Plumleigh-Teignmott, full credentials, and Miss Sophronia Angelina Temminnick, covert recruit.” Her lip curled.

The man touched the brim of his top hat and bowed to each in turn.

Captain Niall had a nice smile, and Sophronia liked his boneless way of moving. But she had a sinking suspicion he wasn’t wearing a cravat under the greatcoat. Also, it looked as if his top hat was tied under his chin like a

baby’s bonnet. Since she figured it might be rude to point out the man’s deficiencies in attire to his face, she said instead, “I do hope the coachman finds his way back to civilization safely.”

“Commendable conscientiousness, Miss Temminnick, but I shouldn’t trouble yourself.”

Behind them, the sun had completely set. The airship, drifting away, began to fade into the misty, purpled sky, becoming increasingly difficult to see.

“Back in a jiff.” The young captain ambled down a little gulley, disappearing behind a large rock.

The ladies could still see his top hat bobbing, but nothing else, and that only for a moment. The hat began to melt down and out of sight. *Was he crouching?* It was difficult to hear anything above the wind, and Sophronia’s ears were already starting to ache from exposure, but she thought she could detect a moan of pain.

Then, out from behind the rock, trotting up the gulley, came a massive wolf. A rangy beast with dark, mottled, black-and-brown fur and a fluffy, white-tipped tail.

Dimity let out of a squeak of alarm.

Sophronia froze, but only for a moment. *Werewolf!* said her brain, putting everything together in one split second. The lack of shoes. The full greatcoat. Now he was coming *at* them.

She turned and ran straight for the nearest coppice of trees, thinking only in terms of safety. She ignored Monique’s instructions for her to stop. She didn’t even think of poor Dimity. Her only instinct was that of prey: to scurry and hide, to escape the predator.

The werewolf leapt after her far faster than any normal wolf ever could. Not that Sophronia had ever met such a monster before. She had heard the rumors about supernatural speed and strength, but she had hardly given them credence. This werewolf proved all the fairy tales true. Before she had gone more than a few paces, he caught up to her and jumped over her head, twisting in midair and coming to rest facing her and blocking her path.

Sophronia crashed right into him and fell to her back on the rough grass, winded.

Before she could rise, a massive paw descended onto her chest, and a vicious wolf face appeared above her—black nose damp and teeth bared.

The face descended and… nothing.

Sophronia screwed her eyes shut and turned her head away, waiting for the deathblow to come from his other massive paw, or for those glistening canines to close about her neck.

Still nothing.

I guess I'm not dead. She cautiously opened her eyes to look up into the wolf's yellow ones. They crinkled at her, and the beast lolled out his tongue, grinning. His massive, sweeping tail brushed back and forth behind him. She noticed then, much to her shock, that the top hat was still tied securely to his head.

This incongruity served to calm her as nothing else could have. Later, Sophronia was to wonder if this was the reason Captain Niall always wore a top hat, even when he changed—to put people at ease. Or if he believed that, whatever the form, a gentleman should never be without his hat.

She made to sit up. When he refused to let her, she said, "I won't run again. I'm sorry. You startled me. I've never met a werewolf before."

With a small nod, he backed away.

Dimity offered Sophronia a helping hand up. "Sophronia's parents are conservatives," she explained to the creature. She moved cautiously, suggesting that she, too, was unfamiliar with werewolves, for all her progressive upbringing. *Or perhaps that is the way one is supposed to behave around them.* Sophronia decided to take her cues from her new friend, and stood very slowly.

Monique minced over. "If you are quite done making a fool of yourself, Covert?"

Sophronia snapped back, "I wouldn't want to make a promise I couldn't keep."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't. I'd better go first, Captain. Show them how it's done."

The wolf nodded his furry, top-hatted head.

Then Monique de Pelouse did the most remarkable thing. She sat down sidesaddle on top of the werewolf's back, as though he were a Shetland pony.

"One holds on, like so," she explained officiously, burying her hands in the wolf's thick neck ruff. "Then one leans forward as much as possible."

Sophronia thought she heard the girl's stays creak.

The werewolf trotted off, gaining speed until he was nothing but a blur racing across the heath toward the floating school.

Sophronia squinted, trying to follow his movements. He leapt impossibly high into the air, toward the ship. He was a supernatural creature, and clearly very powerful, but even werewolves couldn't fly. It became clear, however, that he didn't intend to, for he appeared to have landed midair.

"Must be some kind of platform," said Dimity.

Sophronia nodded. "Suspended on long cords, perhaps?"

Monique dismounted, and Captain Niall jumped down and came racing back to them.

He looked expectantly at Dimity.

Dimity glanced at Sophronia and said, "Oh, dear."

Sophronia smiled. "If you're afraid of falling, you could ride astride. It's much easier to hang on to a horse that way."

Dimity looked affronted at the very idea.

"It was only a suggestion."

"You're very calm."

Sophronia shrugged. "I'm overburdened by strange occurrences at the moment. I'll go next, if you like."

Dimity looked relieved and gestured expansively with one hand.

Sophronia climbed onto the werewolf. Her mother would have had hysterics—leaving aside the whole werewolf steed aspect—at the very idea that a daughter of hers would ride *astride*! Sophronia merely wrapped both her arms and legs about the wolf. "I'm ready." His fur smelled of hay, sandalwood, and pork sausages.

He started slowly, accustoming her to his gait—which was not at all like that of a horse!—then picked up speed. Sophronia hunkered down, watching the grass and rocks rush by beneath them. They neared the airship, and with a tremendous bunching of haunches and a surge of power, Captain Niall leapt into the air.

For a brief, glorious moment, Sophronia felt as close to flying as she ever would. The wind lifted her hair and dress; the emptiness of space surrounded her; the ground was far below. Then the werewolf touched down lightly onto a small platform beside a bored-looking Monique.

Sophronia climbed off. "Thank you, sir, most enjoyable."

Captain Niall jumped back down to collect Dimity.

As Monique was ignoring her, Sophronia examined the workings of the platform. It was made of thick glass, hollowed on the inside like a box, and hung on four chains. These were looped about pulleys at each corner, which meant the whole thing could be raised and lowered as one unit.

She craned her neck, but saw neither hole nor docking structure in the underside of the airship.

A distant shrieking, getting louder and louder, heralded Dimity's arrival.

As soon as they landed, Dimity stopped screaming—embarrassed—and dismounted. Then she sat down on the platform abruptly.

Monique laughed.

Sophronia hurried to her friend's side. "Are you unwell?"

"My nerves are a little shaky, I must confess. No, please, leave me until I recover the use of my knees. That was a tad overwhelming."

"I thought it was quite a wheeze."

"I'm beginning to understand that about you. I'm not convinced it is a good personality trait, but it certainly appears to be useful." Dimity pushed her hair out of her face with a trembling hand.

Captain Niall deposited Dimity's basket, which he had carried in his mouth, next to her and barked imperiously. He then tilted forward over one foreleg in a lupine bow.

Sophronia and Monique curtsied politely, and Dimity nodded from her seated position. Then he was away, jumping down to the moor below.

"Isn't he joining us?" Sophronia was confused.

"Oh, he doesn't *live* at the school. He's a *werewolf*. They don't float. Didn't you know?"

Sophronia, who did not know, felt unjustly chastised. And also strangely bereft. Now that she knew what Captain Niall had been hiding with his bare feet and oddities of dress, she rather liked the man. He might have made for an ally of sorts.

Still, she had Dimity.

As if in reply to this thought, Dimity grinned at her. "I'm glad you're with me. I was so nervous about coming in alone. Everyone will know one another already."

Sophronia crouched down and squeezed her friend's hand. She was glad she had crouched, for with very little warning, the platform rocked from

side to side and began to rise toward the airship above.

Monique gave a squeak of alarm as the jolt almost tumbled her over the edge. Acting as if it were all her idea, she also sat.

The platform picked up speed until it was racing along briskly. The underside of the airship looked to be of solid wood and metal construction. *Our skulls would definitely not win any kind of encounter with it!* Sophronia resisted the urge to raise her arms above her head to shield herself. Monique was sitting, unflinching, and Sophronia wasn't about to give the girl any more ammunition.

She and Dimity exchanged terrified glances.

At the very last minute, a hatch snapped open directly above them and they sped inside the ship, out of the freezing evening air and into warm darkness.

The platform stopped. The hatch snapped shut behind them. All was black. After the violence of the wind, the sudden stillness was overwhelming.

Sophronia's eyes adjusted quickly. They were in a large, cavernous room, like a barn, with beams and supports indecently exposed all around them. It was curved, however, like the inside of a very large rowboat.

They heard the chattering first: amiable but argumentative female voices. Then across from them, a door opened, and a beam of yellow light spiked through. Three silhouetted figures entered, one after another, all garbed in the voluminous dress of a modest upper-class Englishwoman. The first was of medium size and medium build, with a halo of blonde curls; then came a tall woman; and lastly a short, dumpy female.

Miss Medium held a lamp and was by far the best looking, although this fact was well-hidden under a quantity of face paint that might embarrass even an opera dancer.

Dimity was charmed. "Look at her cheek rouge!"

"Her what?" Sophronia was shocked. One ordinarily didn't expect such an application of powder, except from women of ill repute. *What kind of finishing school has a lady of the night on staff?*

"Rouge—the red stuff on her cheeks."

"Oh! I thought that was jam."

"Oh, really!" Dimity tittered obligingly.

The short, dumpy female was wearing a religious habit of some

approximation. The robes had been cut and pinned into a facsimile of modern dress, full skirts, ruffles, and all. Over her head she wore a hat that was part lace floof, part wimple.

Miss Tall was the only one of the three who actually looked the part of a teacher. Sophronia adjusted her assessment from merely "tall" to "impossibly angular." *Like a human hatstand.* This woman was severely dressed, with a face that might have been pretty if all the lines resulted from smiling rather than frowning. As it was, she looked like a stoat with gastric problems.

Monique stepped down off the platform and approached the three women. "You said it was a simple retrieval operation. No danger!" She was not speaking in the manner of a student to her superiors.

The nun said, "Now, dear, please don't carry on."

"'No difficulty finishing, Monique.' That's what you said!"

"Well, dear, it *was* your exam."

"It's a very good thing that I can keep a cool head in a crisis! We were attacked by flywaymen! I had to take *measures* to get us out of there safely."

"Explain," barked the tall one. Her accent was French in a way that suggested it was not fake. "And take off that ridiculous wig."

"The coachman was incapacitated, and those two panicked." Monique removed her wig, revealing that she was a blonde, and gestured with it at Sophronia and Dimity. "I had to take charge of the carriage and enact a daring escape. Unfortunately, we had to leave our belongings behind."

Sophronia was flabbergasted by this parade of outright lies. Monique definitely had some kind of secondary agenda. *What's going on here?*

Dimity said, "Oh, I say! That's not *at all* what happened."

"Those two made consistent errors in judgment and protocol. They even fainted at the *wrong* moments. They're entirely at odds with me. I can't think why. I've been perfectly civil to them the entire time. I believe that they want to take all the credit for *my* intelligent actions. They clearly don't want me to finish!"

"What?" said Sophronia, so shocked she was moved to speak.

"Look at her, all innocence! She's the crafty one. I'd watch her if I were you."

"She's lying," said Sophronia flatly; there was no other response

possible.

The painted woman interrupted. “The particulars matter not at this juncture. The question is, Miss Pelouse, do you have *it*?”

Monique gestured to her torn dress. “Of course I don’t have it! I’m not so idiotic as to keep it on my person. As soon as I realized what it was, and that you’d given me a dangerous finish, I secreted it away in a private location.”

Sophronia understood the undercurrent of that statement. *She expected us to be attacked by flywaymen all along.*

The bony female craned her neck forward and hissed, “Where?”

Sophronia frowned, trying to remember a time when Monique might have hidden something.

Monique shook her head. “Oh, no. When I’m properly finished, then I’ll tell you.”

The Frenchwoman stepped forward to loom over the girl. “You manipulative baggage, I ought to—”

The dumpy nun put a hand on her arm.

“Now, Beatrice, don’t fuss. We have new girls here, don’t forget.”

Beatrice glanced at Sophronia and Dimity, and then snorted.

Gosh, thought Sophronia, *the French are every bit as rude as Mumsy always said they were.*

The painted woman said, “Beatrice, take Miss Pelouse away and see if you can’t come to an arrangement.”

Monique looked militant. “I’ll summon reinforcements if I have to.”

“Are you threatening me, girl? We shall see about that.” The Frenchwoman did not look cowed.

Sophronia shuddered—she wouldn’t want to be alone with either of them for any length of time.

She heard Miss Tall say, as the two walked away, “Properly finish, my dear? What makes you think there is any way for you to finish at all, now?”

Sophronia decided to forget Monique for the time being.

“Well, it certainly appears that you two have had a very exciting journey,” said the nun.

“We didn’t faint!” protested Dimity. “Or, rather, Sophronia didn’t faint. I did, but only after *we* rescued Monique from the flywaymen! She told it all backward!”

“Do you have witnesses?”

“Well, my brother was there.”

The teachers exchanged looks. Apparently Pillover’s reliability was questionable. “A boy? I don’t know.”

“And there was the coachman.” Dimity would not let the matter rest.

“He was insensible for most of the event,” Sophronia pointed out.

“You’re a funny one, aren’t you?” The painted lady looked at Sophronia closely. “Why aren’t you defending yourself?”

Sophronia shrugged. “I have sisters. I know how this works.”

“Do you indeed?”

Sophronia said nothing else. Monique was covering up her trail as well as self-aggrandizing her own actions. Perhaps she’d given the prototype away to someone else beforehand. Sophronia intended to find out. What was the prototype, and where was it, and why did everyone want it so badly? *Some new kind of device for producing tea inexpensively?* In the Temminnick household, nothing was valued more than good quality tea.

Dimity opened her mouth to protest further, but Sophronia elbowed her in the ribs.

The painted lady said, “Shall we get on with official business? Where was I?”

The nun whispered something in her ear.

“Yes, of course! Welcome to Mademoiselle Geraldine’s Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. I understand one of you is a covert recruit?”

Sophronia raised a tentative hand.

“Welcome, welcome! I’m Lady Linette de Limmone. I’ll be instructing you in music and several of the finer creative arts. This is Sister Herschel-Teape. She’s head of household management. And you are?”

“Sophronia Angelina Temminnick,” said Sophronia with a curtsy.

“Oh, dear,” said Lady Linette. “We are going to have to work on that curtsy.”

“Dimity Ann Plumleigh-Teignmott,” said Dimity, with a better curtsy.

I must ask her to teach me the way of it. It seems a powerful weapon, thought Sophronia.

“Ah, yes, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, we have been expecting you. Sister, if you would kindly get Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott settled. She

knows everything already. Miss Temminnick, you're with me, please."

Dimity squeezed Sophronia's hand. "Good luck." She followed the dumpy nun out of the cavernous room.

The painted woman raised the lantern and looked Sophronia over.

"Well, well, let me see. You're… how old, girl?"

"Fourteen, my lady." Sophronia couldn't believe that a woman with that much face paint was a *real* lady. Mrs. Barnaclegoose had a teacup poodle named Lord Piffle; perhaps Lady Linette's was a similarly spurious title?

"Good bones, average height. I suppose there's no hope of your growing into that chin?" Sophronia said nothing. "No? I thought not. Eyes, indifferent. Hair"—she tsked—"you'll be wearing curling rags the rest of your natural life, poor thing. The freckles. Well. The freckles. I'll have cook order extra buttermilk. But you are confident. Shoulders back, girl, when you're facing inspection. Confident is something we can work with. And Captain Niall likes you."

Sophronia withstood the criticism with only a slight frown. She put her shoulders back as ordered. What she wanted to do was comment on Lady Linette's appearance. So far as Sophronia was concerned, the woman's hair was too curly and her skin too white, and she smelled overwhelmingly of elderflowers. *I wager she wouldn't like it if I told her that to her face!*

What she said instead was, "How do you know what the captain thinks of me?"

"If he didn't think you'd suit, he wouldn't have jumped you up. He has very good judgment, for a, well…" She paused, as though hunting for the right word.

"Werewolf?" suggested Sophronia.

"Oh, no. For a *man*. Now, child, come along. We have much to do, and it is getting late. I suppose you're famished, and, of course, we'll need to settle your luggage and such."

"No luggage, my lady."

"What?"

"Had to leave it behind with the flywaymen."

"You did? Oh, yes, you did, didn't you? How tiresome."

"When I was driving the carriage."

"When *you* were driving the carriage? I thought Miss Pelouse said…" A short pause. "Where was Miss Pelouse during all of this?"

“Well, either fainted in the road or crying in the carriage, depending on which point of the story.” *All of it faked, if you ask me.* But something kept Sophronia from volunteering that information.

“Interesting. Well, Beatrice will sort it all out.”

“What does she teach?”

“Worried, are you? You should be. Professor Lefoux takes a firm hand. Although she’s too fearsome for the debuts. You won’t have her until later. If you stay, that is.”

Sophronia noticed that Lady Linette had neatly avoided answering the question. *What is Professor Lefoux’s subject? I still don’t know.*

“Now, dear, we must press on. Do follow me.”

They emerged from the darkness of a passageway into the open air of one of the main decks—a wide semicircle of rough timber planks.

The school had floated quite high since Captain Niall had jumped them on board. It no longer bobbed through the low mists of the moor, but was instead well above them. Below now lay a mass of white cloud tops, and above was the starry night. Sophronia had never thought to see the other side of clouds. They looked as solid as a feather mattress. She clung to the rail, staring down, hypnotized.

“Amazing,” she breathed.

“Yes, dear. I assure you, you’ll become quite accustomed to it. I am pleased to see you are not afraid of heights.”

Sophronia grinned. “No, never that. Ask the dumbwaiter.”

And that was when the maid mechanical ran straight into her. It was a standard domestic model. Looking down at her feet, Sophronia noticed that the deck was inlaid with multiple tracks. However, like the porter mechanical at Bunson’s, this one had no face, but only inner moving parts, completely visible to the outside world. It also had no voice, for even after it bumped into her and stopped, confused in its protocols, it neither apologized nor asked Sophronia to move.

Lady Linette said, “Really, dear, do get out of its way.”

Sophronia did so, watching with interest as the maid trundled on to the other side of the deck, where a hatch opened and it disappeared inside.

“What was that?”

“A maid mechanical, dear. I know you’re from the country, but surely your family cannot be so backward as that!”

“No, of course not. My family has a butler, an 1846 Frowbritcher. But why doesn’t yours have a proper face?”

“Because it doesn’t need one.”

Sophronia was a little embarrassed, but it had to be said: “But her *parts* are exposed!”

“Mmm, yes, shocking. But you had best get accustomed to the style. Very few of our mechanicals are standard household models.”

They wended their way up several sets of stairs, into and out of long corridors, and over other decks—some of wood, a few of metal, and one that seemed, most illogically, to be made of stone. Sophronia had boarded the airship under the back section of the long dirigible caterpillar, and they now were crossing through its center.

The interior decoration looked much as Sophronia imagined one of the great Atlantic steamers, except that the entire place seemed to have been attacked by a grandmother—the kind of grandmother who knitted horrible small booties for workhouse orphans and made jelly for the deserving poor. Railings and finials supported crocheted antimacassars in mauve and chartreuse. A medieval suit of armor in the corner of one corridor was decorated liberally with ribbon flowers. Sophronia paused to examine it, only to find tiny mechanical devices hidden within the flowers. Suddenly, the outrageous chandeliers at each junction took on sinister aspects. *Are those glass baubles decorative or deadly? They are rather knifelike. Can one call a chandelier sinister?*

“The back end of the school grounds,” explained Lady Linette, “is for group and recreational activities. That is where we take meals and regular exercise. The middle section is comprised of student residences and classrooms, and the front is for teachers and staff. That is where we are heading now.”

“Uh, why?” Sophronia wanted to know.

“To meet Mademoiselle Geraldine, of course.”

“The real one this time?” asked Sophronia, a little snidely. And then, when her stomach rumbled, she added, “Will there be food?”

Lady Linette seemed to find this funny.

Sophronia couldn’t understand Lady Linette. She had a French name, yet her accent was English. Sophronia thought she detected a certain burr that suggested the north country, or possibly the East End.

“Now, be certain to remember which way we are going, Sophronia. It is easy to get lost. The school grounds are rather convoluted. The most important thing to note is that you must be on a middle level or higher to get between sections. Very high up, however, is not recommended. Once you get to the squeak decks, the way between the sections is not suited to proper attire. Ah, here we are. You see this red tassel here? It marks the teachers’ section. You are not permitted to roam anywhere freely at night, and during lesson time you are restricted to certain areas. However, you can *never* enter the tassel section without an adult escort.”

Sophronia nodded. She wondered *how* the restrictions were enforced. Which was the moment she realized she was intrigued enough to give this abnormal finishing school an opportunity to prove itself worthwhile.

“Very well, Miss Temminnick. Tell me a little about yourself. Are you well-educated?”

Sophronia considered this question seriously. “I don’t believe so.”

“Excellent. Ignorance is most undervalued in a student. And have you killed anyone recently?”

Sophronia blinked. “Pardon?”

“Oh, you know, a knife to the neck, or perhaps a cleverly noosed cravat?”

Sophronia said only, “Not my preferred diversion.”

“Oh, dear, how disappointing. Well, don’t you fret. We shall soon find you some useful hobby.”

Lady Linette stopped in front of a fancy-looking door decorated in gilt and navy leather and boasting a particularly large number of tassels. She knocked sharply.

“Come in, do!”

Lady Linette motioned for Sophronia to wait, then went inside alone, closing the door behind her.

After determining that she couldn’t overhear anything through the door, Sophronia nosed about the hallway. The lighting was fascinating. Gas pipes were inset into the wall, and little lamps hung all along the ceiling like so many tiny parasols. It must be expensive, not to mention dangerous, to run gas through walls. Essentially, every corridor they walked along was liable to explode.

Sophronia was near the end of the passage, up on tiptoe to examine one

of the parasol-shaped lights, when another maid mechanical came trundling down the hallway. It carried a tray laden with tea and companion comestibles. However, upon sensing Sophronia, it paused and let out a little whistle of inquiry.

When Sophronia did not respond, it whistled again, imperiously.

Sophronia had no idea what to do. The mechanical was between her and the gilt door. *No Lady Linette to come to the rescue.*

The whistle turned into a very loud shriek, like that of a boatman, and Sophronia guessed that this was how restrictions were enforced.

Halfway down the hallway, a door banged open and a gentleman emerged. He was improbably mediocre in size, shape, and looks. His nondescript features were only emphasized by the addition of a fantastic crimson velvet top hat. The face under the hat, Sophronia saw, did not look at all pleased.

Never Hurl Garlic Mash at a Man with a Crossbow

"Whot, whot?" the man muttered, as if hard of hearing.

He was very pale and boasted an unassuming mustache, which was perched atop his upper lip cautiously, as though it were slightly embarrassed to be there and would like to slide away and become a sideburn or something more fashionable. He wore a pair of spectacles and squinted through them at Sophronia.

"Who goes there?" He had a funny way of talking around his teeth. *As if they pose an inconvenience.*

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," said Sophronia.

"What's that infernal racket? Maid!" He glared at the mechanical barring Sophronia's path. "Stop that immediately."

The mechanical continued to shriek.

"Maid," yelled the man, "this is Professor Braithwope! End alarm protocol gamma six my eye is pickled and the earthworm sulks at midnight, resume previous path."

The alarm stopped and the maid twirled away from Sophronia, swiveling on its tracks as though built entirely of ball bearings. It sped down the corridor.

The man left the confines of his doorway, passed by the maid, and came to glower at Sophronia. "What are you doing in this section of the grounds? No students allowed."

“But sir, Lady Linette brought me.”

“Whot, whot? Well, where is she?” The mustache quivered in annoyance.

“She’s in that room.”

“Whot?”

“That one there. The one with extra tassels.” As she pointed, the mechanical bumped authoritatively at that very door with the laden tray.

Lady Linette opened it and admitted the maid, plus comestibles. Then she looked around, blonde curls bouncing. “Miss Temminnick, what are you doing all the way down there? Was it you who alarmed the mechanical? I did warn you. Oh, Professor, I *am* sorry we disturbed you.”

“Ah, no trouble. No trouble. I was stirring anyway, whot.”

“This is a new student, Miss Temminnick. Covert recruit.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. Isn’t that lovely? We haven’t had one of those in years.”

“Six, to be precise.”

“As you always are, Professor. My dear, the professor here will be teaching you history, deportment, manners, etiquette, and genteel dress.”

Which was when Sophronia finally tore her eyes away from the mustache and noticed that the man was indeed cutting quite the fitted dash, as Petunia might say. In addition to the hat, he was wearing the very latest in evening attire, as if he were about to attend a theatrical performance in one of London’s finer theaters. Sophronia found this odd, as there couldn’t possibly be any practical reason for such garb on board an airship. But she supposed one had to commend the effort. *Unless one regularly wears evening garb to finishing lessons?*

The professor said, “And I also teach coping with—”

Lady Linette interrupted him with a sharp shake of the head.

He coughed rather than finish his sentence. “Ah, covert recruit, ease them in slowly, whot? I suppose you’ve already met Niall?”

Sophronia nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Rest of it later, eh?”

“Miss Temminnick, do come along!” Lady Linette said.

“Nice to meet you, Professor.”

“Likewise, Miss Temminnick. Covert recruit, remarkable. Well, carry on.” With which the man slid smoothly back into his room.

Lady Linette placed one hand on the gold and lapis handle of the gilt door and paused, giving Sophronia a very odd look. Sophronia supposed she meant it to be significant and sultry; however, she looked as though she had a mild case of indigestion.

“Now remember, dear, discernment and discretion are of the utmost importance here. I shall be watching you carefully. You wouldn’t want us to think we had made a mistake in our selection process, now, would you?” Sophronia rather thought that was a tad caustic. *After all, I didn’t ask to come here!*

Still, Sophronia nodded, to indicate she was willing to try, and followed Lady Linette through the gilt door and into… paradise.

Behind the excessive tassels was a private suite of the kind one might find in any upscale boardinghouse. The peculiar, and wondrous, thing was that the walls were lined with shelves. On those shelves were sweets of all shapes and sizes: stacks of petits fours, bonbons, trifles, iced cakes, custards, and any and all other confections that one might desire. Sophronia gaped.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” said a voice.

“Are they… are they *real*?”

The voice laughed. “No, but they look real, don’t they? Little hobby of mine.” An older female approached. She had rinsed red hair, friendly dark eyes, and a generous mouth. However, one was not prone to noticing any of the aforementioned features *first*. Oh, no, what was initially striking about the woman was the fact that she was endowed in a manner that suggested operatic tendencies. Sophronia could think of no more delicate way of putting it—her corset was distinctly under stress.

The woman smiled. “Do you like them?”

It took Sophronia a moment to realize she was referring not to her endowments but to the fake pastries on display.

“They are very… realistic.”

“But you would far rather taste than merely look? I understand. Would you take tea with me? I should dearly like to make your acquaintance. It has been so very long since the school took in an outsider.”

“Six years,” added Sophronia helpfully, figuring this was merely another way of saying covert recruit.

“Really, so long? How did you know?”

“Professor Braithwope told me.”

“Have you met the professor? Such a *nice* man. Definitely *qualit-tay*. Well, Lady Linette, tell me about our newest addition. Is she qualit-tay?”

“I believe she may do. She has certain advantages.”

“And a definite air of nobility. I like that! Oh, but dear me we’re forgetting our manners already. I am Mademoiselle Geraldine.”

“The real one?” asked Sophronia cautiously.

“Of course, child. Why shouldn’t I be? As if anyone would want to impersonate me!”

“Oh, but—” Sophronia caught Lady Linette shaking her head slightly. *Oh, yes, discernment and discretion*. Sophronia switched topics mid-thought. “Pleased to meet you, Headmistress. I’m Sophronia Angelina Temminnick.” She executed her subpar curtsy.

The headmistress blanched. “Oh, dear, we will have to do something about *that*. I’ll be teaching you dance and toilette and apparel selections. How are your steps?”

Sophronia had only had one dance instructor. He’d been hired for all the Temminnick girls, but spent most of his time with the eldest. This had led to the hasty dismissal of said dance instructor. As a result, Sophronia managed to escape the protracted torture of quadrilles. “Absent, I’m afraid, Headmistress.”

“Good! That’s very good. I much prefer a fresh palate. Nothing to unlearn. Now, sit down, do. Have some tea.”

Sophronia sat, and after a moment’s hesitation, began stuffing her face with the little cakes and sandwiches arrayed before her. These proved to be real. And delicious. *Now, if finishing school is full of tea cakes, I could certainly grow to love it.*

“Well,” said the headmistress to Lady Linette, watching Sophronia eat with ill-disguised horror, “we have our work cut out for us.”

“Indeed we do.”

Sophronia stopped chewing long enough to ask the one question that was still really bothering her. “What was the prototype of?”

Mademoiselle Geraldine looked deeply confused. “Prototype? Linette, what is the child talking about?”

Lady Linette gave Sophronia a fierce look, and then covered it up by toying with a curl. “I have no idea, Geraldine, no idea at all. You know

these modern girls—they will have their little joke."

Oh, dear, thought Sophronia, *I might be failing Lady Linette's discernment and discretion mandate already. Exactly how much am I supposed to be concealing from the headmistress?*

"Ah, Linette, sometimes I feel as though I know nothing of what is going on with young persons these days. They seem to talk in cipher. Don't you find?"

"Indubitably, Geraldine."

Sophronia, for lack of any other option, gave a huge, guileless smile and stuffed her face with more tea cake.

A knock came at the door. It swung open, and Professor Braithwope's unstable mustache, followed by its unassuming owner, trotted in.

"Do pardon me, ladies, but Lady Linette, something musically related has come up. It requires your immediate attention."

Lady Linette stood. "You'd better come with me, Miss Temminnick."

Sophronia grabbed a handful of finger sandwiches. "Thank you for the tea, Headmistress. It was most illuminating."

"Very prettily said, my dear. At least we know we won't have any trouble with your elocution. No, dear, don't curtsy. I couldn't bear it—not twice in one night." With that, the headmistress turned back to her tea. Sophronia surmised that they had been dismissed.

Lady Linette hustled her and Professor Braithwope out into the corridor. "What could possibly be so important, Professor?"

"The aetheric long-scan monocular sensors are picking something up. Possibly adversaries."

Sophronia said, "She doesn't know, does she?"

"Who doesn't know what?" Lady Linette's attention swiveled.

Discernment and discretion, indeed! "The headmistress doesn't know what's really going on here."

"Oh, and what is that?"

"I haven't quite figured out the particulars myself, but you're keeping her in the dark intentionally, aren't you?"

"No, dear, *you're* keeping her in the dark intentionally. You students. It's part of the training."

"You're keeping me in the dark, too. Am I supposed to figure something out? Is this a test?"

“Lady Linette,” interrupted the professor, “we really haven’t the time.”

“Oh, yes, lead on, do. To the squeak deck.”

“Whot-ho.”

“I suppose you’d better follow, Miss Temminnick. Can’t have you gallivanting about the tassel section on your own. The mechanicals are already overwrought.”

They moved through a series of corridors. Professor Braithwope led the way with a kind of controlled speed that hinted at a truly heightened fitness level under those fancy clothes—he must be a sportsman. *Cricket, perhaps?* Exiting onto one of the observation decks, he veered off and felt around the back of a railing. There must have been a lever hidden there, for a secret door snapped down, revealing a set of stairs. The three of them climbed up. These stairs were not lit by gas, and there were no windows. It was only the regularity of the steps that kept Sophronia from stumbling.

Eventually, they emerged out onto one of the very top decks, directly under one of the three colossal balloons. This deck was a full circle, stretching from one side of the ship to the other. It was like being on a rooftop. Looking down over one of the railings, Sophronia could see various other sets of decks bulging out, like enormous semicircular steps leading down into cloudy nothingness. Looking across, she could see there were two other decks just like hers, one under each of the other two massive balloons. Out the far back of the ship was a crow’s nest, raised up to be almost touching the underside of the last balloon. Turning about, she saw that at the front, near them, was another crow’s nest. This one was enclosed. It looked like a bathtub overturned on top of another bathtub. There was no apparent means of access, as the only thing holding it up was a set of struts and one long beam.

She pointed. “What’s that?”

“Pilot’s bubble,” Lady Linette answered from behind one of the several telescopes that dotted the edge of the deck.

Professor Braithwope merely stood, squinting, into the night sky. His mustache quivered, due either to the slight breeze or to agitation—it was difficult to tell which.

“How does it land?” Sophronia wanted to know.

“What?” Lady Linette was distracted.

“The school, how does it land?”

“It doesn’t, dear. Not all the way. Mostly, we drift,” replied Lady Linette.

“Then why do you need a pilot?”

Professor Braithwope turned piercing eyes upon her. “You ask a lot of questions, little bite.”

“Well, Professor, sir, you are providing me with a number of curiosities.”

He returned to scanning the skies. Suddenly he pointed. “There!”

Lady Linette swiveled her telescope around, following his pointing finger. “Ah, yes, I see. Oh, dear. Flywaymen.”

“A direct attack? I hardly think that likely, whot?”

“Nevertheless, best warn the engine chamber. Have them wake up all the sooties.”

“Of course.” The professor straightened the shoulders of his fine-cut tails, touched the brim of his top hat at the two ladies, and was off. Instead of going down, as Sophronia assumed one would in order to contact an engine room, he did the most extraordinary thing. He ran up the beam to the pilot’s bubble. He did it with perfect balance and complete fearlessness, despite the wind and the ground far below. He did it so quickly, like a spider, that Sophronia wondered if she’d really seen it at all.

“Can he teach me to do that?” she asked Lady Linette.

“I’m afraid not, dear. That is a skill that has taken him more time to master than you have.”

That only caused Sophronia to look militant. *I wager he was in the circus.* But there was no time to argue, for the professor had already returned. His attention was distracted by a group of six airdinghies heading purposefully in their direction.

Lady Linette said, “Best to sound the alarm.”

Professor Braithwope nodded and did his rapid scuttle over to a small brass box affixed to a railing. He opened this with a key from his waistcoat pocket, reached inside, and toggled something. A loud bell began clanging —a bell that seemed to have sister bells throughout the ship.

Lady Linette said, “When you hear that in future, Miss Temminnick, it means deck access is restricted and all students are to remain stationary and *not involve themselves*.”

Sophronia didn’t say anything in response to that. In all her fourteen

long years, she had never stayed stationary and uninvolved in anything. Nevertheless, she did end up following her new teacher's orders this once, for the squeak deck became suddenly covered in mechanicals. Sophronia was hard put to find a spot safe from being bumped.

In a synchronized movement, the mechanicals all settled back onto their rear wheels, locking down to the deck with a clunk, and altered *themselves*. Like the porter at the boy's school, these had open hatches in their chests, only much bigger ones, so that their whole upper torsos were sliding back. Each hatch ejected the barrel of what appeared to be a small cannon. Then, in one smooth motion, they all swiveled and pointed their little cannons at… Professor Braithwope. *Goodness*, thought Sophronia, *what did he do that was so bad?*

"Soldier mechanicals?" asked Sophronia of the air. At which juncture she noticed that the professor had a tiny crossbow in his hands. The bow was armed but pointing harmlessly down at the deck.

"Wait for it, Professor. We are an institution of high learning and higher manners. We simply cannot shoot first; it isn't done. Now, remember that, Miss Temminnick, do—a lady never shoots first. She asks questions, *then* she shoots."

"Yes, Lady Linette, I'll remember," said Sophronia, riveted.

The fleet of airdinghies was now near enough for Sophronia to make out figures in the carrier baskets. They were dressed as their compatriots had been earlier that day, in goggles and riding outfits. There was one odd man out, however. In the airdinghy farthest to the left. Standing at the back, in the manner of an usher at the theater, was a *gentleman*. Sophronia couldn't make out his features, but he was dressed in black with a stovepipe hat. His cravat was green, as was the band about his top hat. Despite his upper-crust dress, he remained in the background.

"Why aren't you firing, Professor Braithwope?" A French-accented and imperious question came from Sophronia's right. Professor Lefoux appeared out of a nearby hatch, all angles and disapproval.

"No just cause," explained Lady Linette.

"But those are criminals out there. Flywaymen. We need no other cause."

"Patience, Beatrice. We must understand what they want of us."

"We know what they want! They want the prototype!"

“Did you get the location out of Monique?”

“No, she’s closed-lipped, that one. *Some* of our lessons she learned well.”

“So?”

“So I punted her down to debut status. We shall see if the boredom of relearning everything with the new girls loosens her tongue.” Sophronia did not like the sound of that. It meant Monique would be in all her classes!

One of the flywaymen hoisted something to the edge of his dinghy.

Professor Braithwope tensed and pointed the crossbow toward the activity.

“Not yet,” said Lady Linette.

The flywaymen’s object made a loud *sput* and fired. A white mass hurtled toward them and landed with a *splat* against the side of the deck near Professor Braithwope.

The professor began to cough and fan the front of his face frantically while backing away at the same time. He was wheezing and his eyes were tearing up.

The ladies, however, did not seem to feel any ill effects. Professor Lefoux approached and bent over to examine the white substance.

“Garlic mash,” she said, without emotion.

“That’s simply petty!” said Lady Linette. “Are you handling the exposure well enough, Professor?”

He sneezed at her.

Professor Lefoux occupied herself with kicking the mashed garlic into a pile and then covering it over with a handkerchief.

Through his wheezing, Professor Braithwope said, “Now can I target them?” His tiny crossbow was up. All the while, the mechanicals’ little cannons remained trained on him. The mechanicals, at least, considered him the greatest threat. *Must be the mustache,* thought Sophronia.

“No, no. That was only a warning shot, meant to discombobulate.”

“Whot? Warning, you say? *Achoo!* Well, it worked.” Professor Braithwope rubbed at his eyes with his free hand.

Sophronia watched in fascination as one of the airdinghies hoisted a white flag on the end of a mop and approached even closer. The small airship wafted one direction and then the next, as if confused.

“They want to parley?” Professor Lefoux was incredulous.

“Let them. We shall see what they have to say.”

When the dinghy was only a few lengths away, the flywaymen inside mounted a catapult onto the carrier basket edge and hurled something else at the squeak deck.

It landed with a clatter and rolled across the planks, coming to rest against the base of one of the mechanicals. The object unfurled, revealing that it was also a mechanical, only much smaller than the ones standing guard. It was not human-looking at all, nor any attempt at human-looking. It had four legs—four very short legs—and a small, spiky tail. Steam emanated slightly from its underbelly, and smoke came out from under its leather earflaps. It looked a little like one of those sausage dogs the Germans were so fond of.

“Mechanimal!” yelled Lady Linette. “Everybody hide!”

Sophronia took refuge behind one of the defensive mechanicals, as did the two female teachers. Professor Braithwope did not obey the command. He stood firm. His sneezing subsided and his crossbow remained trained on the airdinghy.

The sausage dog didn’t seem to understand the fear it caused. It trotted hopefully up to Professor Braithwope, mechanical tail wagging back and forth in perfect clockwork rhythm—tick-tock, tick-tock.

Upon reaching the professor, the mechanimal stopped, and then—Sophronia blushed—it squatted down and emitted a tube of glass out its backside.

Professor Braithwope stared and then bent down, retrieved the tube, and stood, all without relaxing his arm. He was clearly unwilling to let go of the crossbow, so he pulled the cork stopper out of the tube with his teeth. The stopper caught and stuck on one of them, but he didn’t notice. Inside the tube was a tiny roll of paper with a printed message.

Deciding there was no apparent danger from the mechanimal, the two lady teachers reemerged.

“Well,” demanded Lady Linette, “what does it say?”

Professor Braithwope began to read, but his words were garbled by the cork. “Ith sayth thath—”

“Professor, you have something stuck on your fang,” hissed Lady Linette, clearly embarrassed for the man.

“Whoth? Whoth?”

Professor Lefoux reached forward and tugged off the offending cork.

Professor Braithwope read out, “It says that they want the prototype. They are giving us three weeks to produce it, after which they will return with reinforcements.”

“Absurd! What kind of reinforcements could flywaymen possibly have?” Professor Lefoux blustered.

Lady Linette was not so dismissive. “If they were being paid enough…”

“You think the Picklemen are behind this, whot?” Professor Braithwope swirled the little note between his long white fingers.

“Who else?” said Professor Lefoux, and then she added, “On the positive end of things, if they are threatening us, it means they haven’t got it. No one’s got it. Wherever Monique hid it, she hid it from everyone.”

“Trained her too well, whot?” Professor Braithwope let out a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Little pitchers have big ears,” said Lady Linette, nodding to where Sophronia still skulked behind a mechanical.

Sophronia came out, wondering what was required of her. Nothing, apparently, as the adults went back to ignoring her. She remained wildly curious about the prototype, but unfortunately, nothing else about it was mentioned.

Professor Braithwope waved the message at the flywaymen in the airdinghy nearest them and then doffed his hat with a free thumb.

Taking this as a dismissal, the whole parade of tiny airships turned and drifted lazily away.

“Three weeks,” muttered Lady Linette. “Suggested course of action?”

“Leave the real one be for now; the girl’s clearly hidden it well enough, whot?”

“We might provide them with a temporary surrogate,” suggested Professor Lefoux.

“That *is* a good idea. Do you think you could?” Lady Linette turned to her compatriot.

“I don’t see why not. I have old sketches of a previous model.”

“Capital. Put some of the older girls on to it, too, do them good, whot? Then we can ask Bunson’s to put the beastie together.” Professor Braithwope nodded, smiling a tight-lipped smile. He handed Lady Linette the tube and message and disarmed the dart from his little crossbow. The

defensive mechanicals all around them instantly lowered their cannons and closed the hatches in their chests.

Professor Braithwope returned to the brass box, opened it, and switched the lever inside. With a whir of gears, the mechanicals all trundled away. He then returned to Professor Lefoux's side and offered her his arm. "What initial material approach do you think best?"

"Well, I suspect magnetized steel might be the most emulatory. Copper could also work. We should get the furnace heated immediately."

"Steel, whot? Capital idea. Capital."

The two moved toward the exit hatch, Professor Lefoux looming over her diminutive male escort. Sophronia watched them go in bemusement.

"Well, that was rather a plump. I do apologize, Miss Temminnick. I assure you things aren't generally this much—well, *much*. If you'd like to follow me, I'll see you settled." Lady Linette dismissed the whole occurrence with a little toss of her head.

Sophronia hesitated, and then—because everyone seemed to have forgotten him and he looked so forlorn—she scooped up the sausage dog mechanimal and hid him in her large pinafore pocket. Then she trailed after her new teacher.

Music teacher, she thought, looking at the full skirts of Lady Linette's lavender dress. *And I'm Queen of the Vampires.*

Of course, the next day, when it finally came time for lessons, Sophronia was to find Lady Linette sitting at a pianoforte, playing scales.

The Real Meaning of Finishing

Miss Temminnick, you share this parlor with the other debuts. Now, ladies," Lady Linette said, looking at the four girls before her, "this is Miss Temminnick. I'm certain you will make her welcome. She is now ready to learn more about our educational institution." With that, Lady Linette whirled away to devote her time to more pressing matters.

Sophronia stood awkwardly in the center of the room. Most of the girls before her were younger than she, and all of them were better dressed. For the first time, she actually felt a twinge of concern about the modishness of her attire. Critical sisters were one thing, but these young ladies were elegant, with opinions more important than those of mere sisters. She reached inside her pinafore pocket and produced the little sausage dog.

"Is that all you brought with you? A mechanimal?" This was said by a mocking voice with clipped elocution, as if each word were being prematurely assassinated.

The girl behind the voice was tiny, with a mass of tightly curled black hair and a heart-shaped face set in a morose expression. She was, unfortunately, beautiful. Sophronia's only consolation was that the girl had a decidedly *low* nose. Sitting next to her was a wholesome redhead with freckles quite beyond Sophronia's own—somewhat of a relief, that—who glanced with shy interest at the mechanimal and then focused her attention on her own shoes. Next to her sat Dimity. The last girl, who was not seated, was an angular, mannish creature, her posture slouched and her dress ill-fitting. She was occupied in chewing on a stick and sneering at them all

from the far corner of the room.

“Sophronia! Where did you get that?” Dimity bounced to her feet and came dashing up to exclaim over the mechanimal. She had changed clothing, presumably having borrowed a dress. She’d kept on her garish jewelry, however, and found a gown of sea green that strained to balloon over her many petticoats.

“I happened upon him during a recent excursion to a squeak deck. I thought I’d call him Bumbersnoot.”

“Goodness me, why?” Dimity patted the metal dog on the top of his head with two fingers, not convinced. Bumbersnoot puffed out some smoke, flapping his little leather ears. Dimity started back.

“Why not?” Sophronia looked over at the pretty girl with the mocking voice. “And, unfortunately, he is indeed all I have with me. We had a bit of an upset with the luggage on our way in.”

“Which I told you *all about*,” said Monique de Pelouse, appearing in the room from one of the bedchambers. The room was set up like a proper drawing room, most unlike what Sophronia expected in a school.

Dimity looked like she’d swallowed something sour. Apparently Monique was still lying about the rescue.

“Oh, yes, indeed you did, Miss Pelouse,” said the pretty one with the mocking voice. “So exciting.”

“We aren’t allowed personal mechanicals.” Monique tilted her blonde head, eyes narrowing. Sophronia noticed her hair was now up and styled, and that without the wig and face paint she was quite beautiful, if a little aristocratically horsey. *Too many teeth.*

Sophronia put down Bumbersnoot, who began trotting around the room curiously. She walked over to the blonde girl, sidling in close. Monique looked uncomfortable with the proximity. “How about a bargain, Monique? You refrain from telling anyone important about Bumbersnoot, and I won’t make a fuss about your rewriting history.”

Monique’s eyes narrowed, but she said, “Very well,” with ill humor.

That was rather easier than I thought it would be. “Very gracious, Monique,” said Sophronia politely.

“This is all your fault, you know. My being here, demoted, living with the *debuts*!” Monique said the word like it was something smelly.

“Very logical. All I did was rescue you. Are you suggesting Dimity and I

should have left you to rot with the flywaymen? I'm sure that could still be arranged." Sophronia turned away.

The other girls had been distracted by Sophronia's new pet. Bumbersnoot was cavorting about, puffing steam and bumping into furniture and shoes in a most buffoonish manner. His tail wagged the whole time with tick-tock precision.

"May we keep him?" asked the clipped-voice girl hopefully. They all turned to look at Monique.

"If we must." Monique, after a brief hesitation, no doubt unhappy that she must socialize with girls so far beneath her, took a seat. *But she's pleased enough to be the one to make all final decisions by right of age.* Sophronia was pretty certain she should try to nip that tendency in the bud.

She turned to Dimity, mystified. "Who *are* these ladies?"

Dimity blushed. "Ah, yes. Oh, dear. Introductions. Let me see if I can remember. I only recently became acquainted myself. You already know Monique; she's the oldest—which I guess gives her some status. But precedence, who has precedence?"

The young ladies looked about at one another, and then, as one, gestured to the tall girl in the far corner.

Speaking as though the words pained her, the pretty brunette said, "Sidheag, if you would believe it. She's a proper lady. Laird or something like."

Sidheag took a little more interest in the conversation once her name was mentioned. Not enough to move close—but her head came up. "Aye?"

"How do you do?" said Sophronia.

"Lady Bacon, this is Sophronia Angelica Tendency. Sophronia, this is Lady Bacon," Dimity struggled to say.

The girls all laughed.

The one called Sidheag said, in a profoundly Scottish accent, "I'm Sidheag *Maccon*, Lady Kingair, by rights. But you can call me Sidheag; everyone else does."

"Sophronia *Angelina Temminnick*," said Sophronia, gently correcting Dimity.

Everyone laughed again.

"Oh, sorry." Dimity was mortified by her blunder.

"Perhaps if we skipped standards, this once, and introduced ourselves?"

suggested Sophronia, trying to protect Dimity from further humiliation.

"Oh, I don't know about that! It isn't done," said the pretty one, looking with relish at Dimity. "I'd like to see her try the rest of us."

Lady Sidheag Maccon straightened up, revealing that she was a good deal taller than any girl of thirteen ought to be. She strode over to Sophronia. Her hair lay in a thick plait down her back. Her face was masculine in a way that no one would ever call attractive, but her eyes were a lovely tawny yellow color.

Sidheag turned those eyes, filled with flinty disregard, upon the pert brunette. "*That* is Preshea Buss. She thinks she's smarter than everyone, when really she's just meaner. As to ranking, forgive me, Preshea, but don't your parents engage in *trade*?"

Preshea made a face like a fish with a digestive complaint. "Daddy dabbles with the East India Company, thank you very much. That's *hardly* trade."

Sidheag turned to the redhead. "Agatha Woosmoss, daughter of the noted railroad baron." The chubby girl looked up quickly from her shoes, nodded, and then returned to her intense scrutiny of her own feet. Sophronia thought that, even at thirteen, poor Agatha looked like she ought to be someone's maiden aunt. All she lacked were spectacles and a lapful of ugly but philanthropic crochet.

"A lively and engaging bunch," said Monique nastily.

Sidheag shrugged, like a boy, upsetting the fall of her gown. "We've only just started. Give us time."

Preshea gestured primly with one thumb. "Sidheag here was practically raised by wolves. One need only look at the way she behaves."

Sidheag laughed. "Practically? What does that matter? I still outrank you."

"Lady Linette says style is everything; one's shoes are as important as one's thoughts, and possibly more powerful in the correct context," said Preshea, sounding as though she were reciting from a broadsheet.

At this, Monique stood up pointedly. "Well, this has been most scintillating. If you would excuse me? I must unpack." Her lip curling at the very idea that she must now live among the debuts, Monique left the room.

Preshea immediately gestured at Sophronia to join them and huddled forward. She lowered her voice. "We understand Monique failed to finish

while retrieving you. Professor Lefoux demoted her. Did you witness it?"

"Did we ever!" Dimity had clearly been waiting patiently for ages to answer this very question. "We were the cause!"

The girls gasped in titillated horror. "No!"

"Oh, yes, yes! Well, it's more Sophronia who's the cause. She saved the day and brought down the flywaymen, while Monique fainted and cried in the street."

Preshea's dour face brightened. "As if Monique had no training at all. That's certainly not how *she* told the story."

"So I gathered, but if she did so well, why the demotion?" said Dimity.

Sophronia glanced warily at Monique's closed door. She figured she hadn't promised to keep Dimity quiet on the subject; only to hold her own tongue and not go whining to the teachers. And at least Dimity wasn't blabbing about the prototype.

Sidheag slapped Sophronia on the back, hard enough to cause her to lurch forward and cough. "Good on you! If you had to make an enemy of anyone, Monique is certainly a high-end choice. Top-quality bite on that one. And many thanks—now we're all stuck with her."

"It wasn't my idea! It was Professor Lefoux's," replied Sophronia. "What exactly does she teach, anyway?" It was a blatant effort to change the subject, but it worked.

Dimity, bless her, was ever eager to be of use. She was clearly full to bursting with useful information garnered while Sophronia had been otherwise occupied. "She's *modern languages*, but Preshea says that's not all."

"Of course not." Sophronia took a seat facing Preshea, looking as wide-eyed and innocent as possible. She imagined herself sitting at the feet of genius and tried to give the impression of profound admiration.

Sidheag looked Sophronia up and down. "You're good. I can see why they wanted you."

Preshea poured everyone tea from a nearby pot and then passed around biscuits. Dimity offered one to Bumbersnoot. He sniffed at it with his mechanical nose, then opened his mouth wide, revealing two cavities: one leading to a storage compartment and the other to a tiny boiler. Dimity popped the biscuit into storage, where it would no doubt grow stale. Bumbersnoot continued his explorations.

Preshea finished serving and began explaining. “Old Lefoux has charge of modern weaponry and technological advancements. She’s an honorary member of the Order of the Brass Octopus. They don’t allow women, not officially, but they certainly use her designs.”

Bumbersnoot approached Agatha and opened his mouth impolitely. Agatha hesitated, reached into her reticule, and fed him a wooden clothespin. It went into the boiler, if the resulting smoke coming out of the mechanimal’s ears was any indication. Bumbersnoot’s tail wagged in approval.

“And Lady Linette is music and…?” Sophronia prompted.

Preshea obliged, puffing up with self-importance. “Intelligence gathering, of course; principles of deceit; fundamental espionage; and rudimentary seduction. I wager you can’t *wait* for seduction class, can you, Agatha?”

Agatha looked petrified at the very idea.

“Don’t worry,” said Sidheag. “Doesn’t happen until fifteen.”

Sophronia was not to be thwarted in her quest for information. “And Mademoiselle Geraldine—do we have any lessons with her?”

“If you’ve met her, you’ve already had one. Ostensibly she’s dance and dress, but really she’s diversion. You know she’s the only one who doesn’t know what this school is really teaching?”

Except for me, of course. Although Sophronia did feel she had it down to two options, neither of them finishing school–related. *Intelligencers or assassins.* She hadn’t been aware until now that either position was open to a female. Sophronia felt that, given her propensity for dumbwaiters and penchant for observation, she’d quite enjoy being an intelligencer, so long as she was spying on someone interesting. But she wasn’t certain about being an assassin. She’d once caused Frowbritcher to run over a mouse, and she still felt guilty about it.

“And Sister Herschel-Teape is household management?”

“Well, that’s *part* of it.” Preshea smiled for the first time, showing perfect small white teeth.

“It’s Preshea’s favorite class already,” said Agatha softly, speaking for the first time.

“Sister Mattie also covers medicinal cures and proper poisonings for every occasion.” Preshea looked positively animated.

Agatha explained further. “Preshea can’t wait until she gets to poison her first husband. She’s a great admirer of Mary Blandy’s work.”

“Oh, you flatter me.”

So we are *being trained to be assassins? Or are they joking with me?* Sophronia looked back and forth between Preshea and Agatha. Agatha didn’t look like she knew how to joke.

“And Professor Braithwope. What does he teach?”

Preshea went quiet at the name, her face once again dour and sulky. Which was odd, because Sophronia had liked Professor Braithwope best of the bunch.

“He’s history.” Agatha plucked at a ruffle on her skirt. Her voice shook slightly. “Some deportment and etiquette as well.”

“But in actuality?” Sophronia prodded.

“Well, vampire lore and defense. What else?” Preshea pretended impatience, but she was clearly a little scared.

Sophronia thought quickly. Professor Braithwope had said he was just getting up when she disturbed him, yet it was after dark. He’d sneezed at garlic mash. He’d got the cork stuck on his *fang*, not his tooth! *Of course. My first vampire*, she thought, disappointed in herself for not realizing it at once and in Professor Braithwope for not being more… well… *vampiric*.

Preshea stood. “Speaking of Professor Braithwope, we ought to get ready, ladies.”

The girls began to rummage about, gathering up lesson books and putting on bonnets. Monique reappeared, looking lovely and pulled together in a sweeping day dress of rose silk. With a good deal of bustle they filed out of the room, following Monique, who assumed the position of preeminence without challenge.

Sophronia summoned Bumbersnoot with an imperious gesture. The mechanimal bumped into her shoe and looked up. “Stay!” she said firmly, and then, “Sleep.” The mechanized dog sat back on its haunches and made a little whistling hum before relaxing down, all internal components stilled. *Gracious me, it worked!*

Sophronia trotted after the group, ending up behind Sidheag and next to Dimity. “Where are we going?”

“Lessons, I suppose.” Dimity grinned at her.

“At night?”

“Apparently the academy keeps London hours. Might as well get us accustomed to the Season. Or so Sidheag says.”

“I like Sidheag,” said Sophronia, not caring if the tall girl could hear her. “She reminds me of my brother Freddy. Freddy never pinched as hard as the others.”

Dimity lowered her voice. “She’s not very *ladylike*.”

“I don’t think that is necessarily a character flaw. Some of the most disagreeable people I know are the most ladylike.”

“Oh, I like that!” Dimity pretended offense. She clearly liked to think of herself as a proper lady.

“Present company excluded, of course. Look at Monique. Speaking of which, she and I have an agreement. She won’t tell the teachers about Bumbersnoot if I don’t correct her version of the flywaymen rescue.”

Dimity did not look pleased. “Oh, but Sophronia, she’s such a pollock!”

“I didn’t say *you* would also hold your tongue. But if you could confine yourself to gossiping with students about it, that would mollify her. And it prevents everyone else from figuring out the real reason for her demotion.”

“Oh, are we keeping the prototype secret, too?”

Sophronia slowed, forcing Dimity to fall back with her and allowing distance to develop between them and the others. “Did you hear the alarm?”

Dimity nodded.

Sophronia explained, “It was flywaymen again. A whole bunch of airdinghies this time, after the prototype. They gave the teachers three weeks to find it. Professor Braithwope and Professor Lefoux are trying to build a fake in the interim. Monique won’t tell them the location of the real one. But I think the teachers are allowing her to keep it secret for some reason.”

“Remind me, why are we so interested?”

“It lost us our luggage. Also, it would prove we were better than Monique if we could produce the prototype for the teachers, now wouldn’t it?”

“But what if Monique stashed it before we even got on board the school?”

“Well, then, we will have to determine a way to sneak off and find it.”

“Already? But we just got here! I haven’t even had my supper.”

All the while they talked, they wended their way through the hallways of

the school. As the young ladies were dressed to the height of fashion, this had to be done two by two; any more than that would not fit in the passageway due to the fullness of their skirts. Only Sidheag had a narrow gown, one that looked like it properly belonged on a governess. Sophronia could respect its practicality. Her own Sunday best was not used to such activity as it had seen over the past day. It was beginning to chafe, and she could but wish she had something more sensible to wear.

"What does 'London hours' imply?"

Dimity grinned. "Breakfast at noon, morning calls around three, tea at five, supper at eight, entertainment all evening, and bed by one or two. Doesn't it sound the pip? I'd love to be a London lady. Do you think my parents would be awfully mad if I married a nice politician and gave up on a life of crime? Then I'd get to throw dinner parties all the time."

Sophronia, country girl, for all she was gentry, found the very idea of London hours shocking in the extreme. "Rise at noon, you say?" *Why, that sounds positively decadent!*

Much to her shock, Sophronia actually enjoyed the lessons. They were nothing like what she expected from either a finishing academy or an ordinary grammar school. She'd had, at varying times in her life, a host of indifferent governesses. They were either overwhelmed by the number of children in the Temminnick household or in possession of the remarkable ability to nap through most everything—including lessons. Education, therefore, had been a matter of Sophronia's own interest and access to her father's library, rather than instruction. Consequently, she knew a good deal of ancient history and mythology, something on the fauna of Africa and native hunting practices, and all the rules of cricket, but little else.

"When defending yourself against a vampire," said Professor Braithwope at the start of the lesson, "it is important to remember three things, whot? He is a good deal faster and stronger than you will ever be. He is immortal, so debilitating pain is more useful than attempted disanimation. He is most likely to go for your neck in a frontal assault. And he is easily distracted by damage to his clothing or personal toilette."

"That's four things, Professor," corrected Monique.

"Don't be pert, whot," replied the vampire.

“Are you saying,” Sophronia ventured, “that it’s best to go for the waistcoat? Say, douse it with tea? Or possibly wipe sticky hands on his coat sleeve?”

“Exactly! Very good, Miss Temminnick. Nothing is more distressing to a vampire than a stain. Why do you think containing blood is so important to us? One of the tragedies of any vampire’s life is that in order to survive we must continually handle such an embarrassingly sticky fluid.”

Sophronia wondered whose blood Professor Braithwope drank on board the school. It must be someone loyal to the professor, as if they were a drone. She felt self-consciously for her own neck and thought affectionately of shawls.

The vampire paced back and forth as he lectured, his movements fluid and quick. The room in which they sat in no way resembled a classroom, except that it was *called* a classroom. A series of brocade settees was arranged in a semicircle around an imitation fireplace, a small piano, and an articulated brass statue of a cow. There were plush carpets on the floor, side tables on which the girls placed their books, and a maid mechanical waiting patiently in the corner in case she was needed to fetch tea. It looked more like a drawing room than anything.

“Another weakness in vampires, of course, is the limited range. A vampire who is hive-bound must stay near his queen, and the queen cannot leave her house. Roves are similarly tethered to a place, although our range is larger. When swarming, of course, all distances are moot, whot. There are some notable exceptions; the queen’s praetoriani has a larger range.”

Monique was trying not to look interested. “Why?”

“Our scientists suspect he is in a constant state of swarm because he is responsible for the queen’s safety.”

This was all very confusing to Sophronia, who had heard very few of the terms he was spouting forth and knew almost nothing—beyond late-night parlor stories—about vampires. *I wonder what the professor’s range is? That might be a rude question.* She was just about to ask for clarification on the word “praetoriani” when an explosion shook the classroom.

The entire airship lurched to one side and then righted itself. An odd sensation, since, until that moment, Sophronia had quite forgotten they were afloat.

Several of the girls screamed.

Displaying the speed he had only recently described, Professor Braithwope dashed out the door. Rather than waiting to be told to stay put, Sophronia leapt up and followed him.

The hallway was in chaos, filled mainly with young ladies, most of them covered in some kind of soot. Apart from the soot, they were all dressed beautifully, and were chattering among themselves with more animation than distress. Sophronia estimated around two dozen or so; perhaps half the attendees of the school? She hadn't yet managed a firm grasp on the numbers, but Mademoiselle Geraldine's seemed to have fewer students than one would expect from a normal finishing school.

Professor Lefoux, taller than most by a head, was trying to control the chaos.

"Now, ladies, calm down, do! Is this any way to behave in a crisis? What has Lady Linette told you time and time again?"

The girls quieted and stood expectantly. One or two took out handkerchiefs and began trying to repair the sooty damage to gown and face.

"That was *not* a rhetorical question, ladies!" snapped the Frenchwoman. Professor Lefoux herself was far more soot-covered than any of the others, and less inclined to deal with it. She had her hair back in a tight bun that appeared to pull her skin away from her eyes. It made her look like a greyhound that had stuck its head out a carriage window.

"In a crisis, remain calm," called out one voice from the crowd.

"And?" Professor Lefoux gestured impatiently with both hands.

"Assess any damage to one's attire. A lady is never disreputable in public, unless intended for manipulation of sympathies."

"Good. Anything more?"

"Ascertain the nature of the emergency. See if it can be turned to your advantage or used as an opportunity to gather information," said another voice.

While all this was going on, Sophronia—unconsciously following the instructions being repeated dutifully around her—made her way through the crowd to the open door of Professor Lefoux's classroom. Professor Braithwope stood on the threshold, staring in. He had out his own handkerchief and was waving it about in front of his face ineffectually, trying to dispel the smoke still permeating the room.

Sophronia nudged up next to him and looked inside. *A proper classroom.* There were uncomfortable-looking chairs facing tables covered in interesting-looking apparatus and scientific instruments. The walls were tacked with sketches of complex devices. The room, like the hallway, was in chaos. It might have started life as some kind of laboratory or engineering chamber, but its contents were now overturned, smoked, and covered liberally in black powder.

"I suppose Professor Lefoux and her students haven't had much luck in creating an alternate prototype," said Sophronia mildly.

"Whot?" The vampire sucked on a fang, looking thoughtful. He turned dark eyes on his newest student. "Appears as if they haven't. Wait a moment there, whot! Where did you come from, young lady?"

"Your class, sir. Remember, we were just there."

The vampire only looked at her, not even acknowledging her levity. "Tell me, Miss Temminnick. What was the first thing you wanted to know, just now, before the explosion?"

Sophronia saw no reason to prevaricate. If he really wanted a window to her thoughts, then any possible rudeness was irrelevant. "Your range, sir. Being that you're a rove, as I'm assuming this school is no hive, I was wondering how a vampire in a dirigible managed to float all over the place the way you do. Then I figured you must be bound to the school itself, or something like."

"Something like, indeed."

"*Then* I was wondering, since you were instructing us in defense against vampires, what would happen if you fell overboard. What would happen to your tether? Would it snap? Would you die?"

The vampire narrowed his eyes, looking down his nose at her. He avoided her question by asking her one of his own. "And the explosion—what do you make of it?"

"Perhaps Professor Lefoux should not have tried steel first."

"My goodness, you do pay attention."

"Will you be able to convince Monique to tell you where she stashed the prototype?"

He said nothing at that.

But she's only a student. Sophronia wanted to ask why they didn't torture Monique or something. After all, this seemed as if it might be *that*

kind of school.

Professor Lefoux came bustling over. “Ah, Professor Braithwope. Sorry to disturb. Little problem with the you-know-what; probably shouldn’t have used steel. Copper is obviously superior.”

Professor Braithwope looked down at Sophronia, who gave the vampire an arch look and returned to his classroom and the other girls.

They were crowding the doorway, but had not followed her beyond leaving their own seats.

“What happened?” Dimity asked breathlessly.

“Someone seems to have exploded something black and powdery in a room near ours.”

“Professor Lefoux and the senior girls,” said Monique, no doubt preferring to have been among them herself, explosion or no.

Sophronia returned to her couch and took a seat, crossing her hands demurely in her lap.

Dimity plopped down next to her. “Was it the…?” she hissed.

“Yes.”

“What could explode like that?”

“Lots of things, I suspect.”

“Sometimes I wish Pill were still with us. He knows all about accidental explosions. Then again, he *is* my brother, so it’s nice to be away from him.”

“I managed to extract a bit of the black powder.” Sophronia showed Dimity the fingertip of one of her gloved hands, which she’d purposefully run along the wall inside Professor Lefoux’s classroom.

“I wonder if we could send it to Pill for analysis. Or, uh, *drop* it to him, I guess is a better way of putting it.”

“Do we get post on board this thing?” Sophronia wondered. “If no one even knows where the school is at any given time, how would mail find us?”

“Mummy said she would send me some of my favorite emulsified biscuits, so it must. She mentioned Pillover as well, so perhaps we pick ours up from Bunson’s.”

“Oh, dear, Sophronia, your glove is dirty! Let me help you with that.” Preshea looked more distressed by the black on Sophronia’s white fingertip than she had been by the explosion.

Monique said, “You aren’t permitted to have a soiled glove, not at

Mademoiselle Geraldine’s!”

Sophronia quickly placed her hand in her lap and tucked the offending digit under a fold of skirt. “Oh, I believe I have the glove under control, thank you.”

“Right, ladies, shall we get back to our studies?” Professor Braithwope said as he reentered the room. “We are going to try to address first the best and most deadly application of wooden stakes, hatpins, and hair sticks. If we have time, I will move us on to how to properly judge a gentleman by the color and knot of his cravat. Believe you me, ladies, the two subjects are far more intimately entangled than you might first suppose.”

Sophronia straightened her spine and prepared to be *educated*.

THE PROPER PLACE FOR SOOTIES

The rest of the evening proceeded in a much milder manner. They moved from classroom to classroom, each room having been arranged to that teacher's particular taste. Each time the lesson was more in the manner of a visiting call or an intellectual salon than any school lesson Sophronia's siblings had ever relayed to her.

Sister Mathilde Herschel-Teape's room, which led out onto a small deck, was half potting shed, half manor-house kitchen. Their lesson was on emulsification and the fine art of egg whites as applied to sugared violets, fake eyelashes, skin care, and poison control. She left them with the wise, if somewhat confusing, "Now, remember, my dears, a separated egg is worth two in the bush."

Lady Linette's room was a combination conservatory, boudoir, and house of ill repute. It featured a good deal of red; three chubby, long-haired cats with funny, scrunched-up faces; fringe wherever fringe might be stuck; and some highly questionable artwork. The girls sat in prim rows on long velvet fainting couches. A stuffed duck in a lace mobcap stared austerely down at them from the mantelpiece.

By the end of Lady Linette's lesson on how to faint properly at any event and in a manner to cope with varying types of undergarments, Sophronia was yawning hugely. It had, after all, been a long day full of travel, excitement, and now classes that persisted well past her regular bedtime.

"Ladies don't yawn in public," Monique said loudly, so as to draw Lady

Linette’s attention to the transgression.

“You’ll get used to the London hours eventually, country girl,” Preshea added.

“I suppose you’re from London?” Sophronia had a countryside suspicion of towns.

“My parents keep progressive hours,” the girl replied, avoiding the question in a manner that suggested this was a sore point.

“Miss Temminnick, Miss Buss, Miss Pelouse, if you’re quite finished? Miss Buss, it is as embarrassing to remark upon a behavior as it is to enact it. Of course, Miss Pelouse is, as always, correct, Miss Temminnick. Perhaps, Miss Pelouse, as you know everything so well, you would like to demonstrate fainting in a crowded ballroom in a manner that might attract only the attention of a specific gentleman? Without wrinkling your dress.”

Sophronia was enthralled by the odd way in which the teachers treated Monique. They made it clear her demotion was a punishment, yet sometimes it was almost as if Monique had a kind of control over them. *Which must tie into how she has gotten away with not revealing the prototype’s location.* Then there were times like this, when she was called out and made an example of.

Monique stood and did as instructed.

Lady Linette critiqued the faint closely as Monique executed it.

“Note both hands raised to the forehead. A classic maneuver, but perhaps overly dramatic for a large crowd; you might draw too much attention. Try only one, pressed to the breast. That has the added benefit of drawing a gentleman’s gaze to your décolletage. Not that you younger ladies have any yet, but we can hope. No, not pressed so hard. Miss Pelouse, you’ll skew your gown’s neckline. Very nice. Now, a short breath and a small sigh. Eyes rolling slightly back. Only slightly! Otherwise one looks like a dying sheep. Flutter the eyelashes. Flutter them! More fluttering. Lovely. And sag back slightly. Always backward, ladies, never topple forward. And be certain to situate yourself so that if the gentleman does not respond appropriately, you can pretend to catch yourself against the wall or mantelpiece and make a recovery. Very nice, Miss Pelouse. Very realistic.”

Sophronia yawned again.

“Sophronia,” Dimity whispered, “what are we going to wear to sleep in

tonight?”

“Goodness knows. Our petticoats, I suppose.” For all Sophronia knew, their luggage still lay scattered in the road leagues away.

Such was not the case, as it transpired. After being let out from Lady Linette’s class—“Practice your eyelash-fluttering, ladies. Six rounds of one hundred each before bed”—she and the other girls went to supper in the back part of the school. The recreation section, as the others called it, was much the same as all the others, only with larger, grander, and fewer rooms. Supper completed, their manners closely monitored by the teachers and Sophronia’s knuckles rapped twice for her misuse of a fish knife, they returned to their quarters. The debuts found Sophronia’s battered portmanteau and Dimity’s cases neatly stacked in their parlor.

The girls were divided into two per room, Preshea seeming honored to have been selected by Monique as the best of a bad lot of options. Sophronia was delighted to find Agatha willing to vacate her abode to settle in with Sidheag so that Sophronia and Dimity might share.

“Do you think Monique has some kind of control over the teachers?” Sophronia asked the moment they were left alone. Bumbersnoot had woken upon their return and followed Sophronia dutifully into her new room, then paced back and forth as she unpacked.

“How could she?” Dimity pulled out her underthings furtively and stuffed them quickly into a drawer.

Sophronia gave her a look.

“Her family, I suppose. Although I’ve never heard of them, so they can’t be that important or that evil.” Dimity moved on to less embarrassing apparel: dresses, pinafores, petticoats, slippers, and boots.

Sophronia unpacked her own bags. For the first time in her life, she was slightly embarrassed by her own wardrobe. Her family was largely considered, by the surrounding gentlefolk, to be one of means. But she was still the youngest of four girls, and with three older sisters to clothe, she found her own dresses deficient. She was already composing a begging letter home in her head.

“What if she didn’t hide the prototype but gave it away?” Sophronia suggested.

Dimity was prosaic. “Well, no sense in speculating. We’ll simply have to find out more.”

Unpacking complete, the girls prepared for slumber—Dimity's nightgown was bright yellow!—and settled down for the evening.

Bumbersnoot sat next to Sophronia's cot with a little wheeze of distress. She picked him up and put him at her feet. He wasn't exactly cuddly, and she was sure to bark her shin if she rolled over, but the little mechanimal seemed pleased, and the mini steam engine within made him quite an excellent foot warmer, if nothing else. Sophronia wondered idly if he required a diet of coal and water, and if so, where she would get the coal. *The airship must have a boiler room.* The last thing she heard as she closed her eyes was the tick-tock of Bumbersnoot's mechanical tail wagging back and forth.

Unlike her fellow students, Sophronia awoke early in the morning and decided she might take the opportunity to explore. She supposed there would be mechanicals trundling about and sounding the alarm if they encountered her, so she determined to figure out a way around the massive ship that did not cross any tracks. She chose her most basic dress, with the fewest underskirts and the shortest top skirt, and pulled on her boots with the india-rubber strapping.

She had to use the hallway to get to any exterior decks, so she ran as quickly as possible, sticking to the sides of the passage, away from the tracks that ran down the center. Luckily, she didn't stumble upon any mechanicals. This allowed her to escape out onto one of the lower decks and over the rail to cling on the outside with no one, human or constructed, the wiser. She was left breathless and leaning out and in a manner she was certain would be thought most unladylike.

In the early morning, the moor below was still mist-shrouded, but there was no longer any other cloud cover. Sophronia looked down, considered for a moment, and then decided it was probably better not to look again.

She inched around the banisters and along the outside of the railing. The deck extended around the dirigible's side and then in, before another deck rounded back out again, like flower petals. The difficulty was how to get from one to the next, over the small gap in between. Sophronia had a system developed soon enough: a little twisting movement as she thrust herself willfully over the abyss.

Several of the decks, smaller and more like private balconies, did not have mechanical tracks. Sophronia climbed over the railings of these and explored, peering in at the round windows. It would be good to know, for secrecy's sake, which balconies were safe from mechanical spies, not to mention vulnerable to attack because they lacked mechanical defense. She was also nosy.

As Sophronia made her way, one deck at a time, around the edge of the ship, she eventually left the students' residential area and found herself in the classroom area. There the decks changed, some of them made of strange and mysterious materials, and they did not always have rails. She passed the one that featured Sister Mathilde's greenhouse, and another with long tassels and fancy wicker furnishings that must belong to Lady Linette's classroom. Funny; Sophronia hadn't noticed a door from the classroom out onto the balcony during lessons.

Lady Linette's was the last classroom before the next balloon. There was another balcony, almost touching it, in the forbidden section. There was a little walkway to that balcony.

Lavishly decorated, thought Sophronia, *so probably Lady Linette's private quarters*. She had, as yet, not determined how to get up or down to any of the upper or lower decks, but from the sculpted railing of that particular private deck, a tempting rope ladder hung down to the lower levels.

Sophronia hesitated. She couldn't see any tracks, and she guessed Lady Linette wasn't an early riser. It was a risk. She didn't want trouble on her second day. Then again, there was that rope ladder.

Sophronia made the switch to the forbidden section, shimmied along the outside of the railing over to the ladder, and began to climb down.

The ladder was pegged inward at the next level. Sophronia considered getting off there, but at the very bottom of the ship there *had* to be an engine chamber. She could see the steam emanating from below. And where there was steam, there would be boilers. And where there were boilers, there must be coal. Bumbersnoot was probably hungry. So she kept climbing down. There were no decks at the bottom level; only small portholes which she could press her face against. The glass in these was too filthy to see through, and not from the outside world, but from something within.

The ladder ended at a hatch in the side of the ship. After a brief hesitation, Sophronia twisted the handle and climbed inside. *Boiler room!*

The boiler room of the school was loud, and hot, and as soot-covered as Professor Lefoux's classroom had been after the fake prototype exploded.

Sophronia's entrance caused little reaction. It had to have been noticed, for she let a blast of light and fresh air into the dark, musty interior. But there was a controlled chaos all around her, and very few bothered to acknowledge her presence.

There were a number of larger men, who must be the firemen or engineers, and two dozen or more very grubby boys, covered in black soot, running about with fuel and scurrying up and down stacks of boxes, piles of coal, and ladders to the upper levels. A few of these doffed their caps as they passed Sophronia, but none bothered to stop or properly greet her.

She simply stood, taking in the bedlam and the massive boilers and wondering why the place was not staffed by mechanicals. *Perhaps the tasks are too complicated? Or too vital to entrust to machines?* The work seemed to be quite labor intensive, yet once or twice a bark of laughter issued forth from one side of the room, where a group of boys were hard at work shoveling coal into an immense boiler.

Sophronia made her way cautiously over to them, bending to scoop up some small pieces of coal, which she stuffed into the pocket of her pinafore.

"What's that one run?" she asked, once she arrived at the group.

"Propeller," came the answer, and then, "What-ho! What's an Uptop doing messing about down south?"

"Only curious," replied Sophronia. "No lessons until the afternoon, so I thought I would explore."

"You mean, you're an *actual* student?"

"'Course she is, don't she look as like?"

"Naw, her dress ain't fancy enough by halves."

"Well, thank you very much," said Sophronia, pretending hurt.

"Asides, students ain't permitted south."

"Well, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Sophronia. And you are?" She figured introducing *herself* couldn't be considered impolite, given that these were manual laborers and, judging by their accents, from equally manual upbringings.

"Ships' sooties, us, miss."

A yell of “Oy, up!” came from behind them, and the boys scattered like a group of very excitable partridge. Sophronia followed their lead. A new sootie, riding astride a great pile of coal in some kind of wheelbarrow-like contraption, came hurtling toward them. The wheelbarrow rattled headlong at the maw of the boiler. The boy remained proudly atop it, whooping enthusiastically. The others hooted him on.

Sophronia gasped, certain the thing would go crashing right into the impossibly hot boiler, dumping both coal and boy inside. At the last minute, the sootie jumped off and somersaulted away, leaving the cart to rush forward; tip in, unloading all of its coal inside; and bounce off.

“Pips! It worked!” The boy jumped to his feet.

The others all returned and gathered around him, proving that he was taller than most.

“Takes you twice as long to load it full. We’re still stoking more per hour,” commented one.

“Yes,” said the tall one, “but ain’t this *invention*?”

“How’d it bounce back like that?” Sophronia asked, joining the crowd as if she had always been there.

The boy turned in her direction. In addition to being taller than the others, he seemed to be more thickly coated in soot. His eyes were startlingly white in a dark face. Her question solicited a flash of equally startlingly white teeth. “Ah, yes, a spring rebound mechanism without india-rubber fixings. Vieve worked a whole week on that. Wait a minute there…. They letting girls be sooties now?”

“She’s an Uptop.”

“Came exploring.”

“Found us.”

“Ah, not so good at exploring, then?” The tall boy hooted at his own joke.

“I beg your pardon!” Sophronia took mild umbrage.

“No offense meant, miss. We sooties aren’t exactly upmarket chappy chaps.”

“Yet that contraption of yours was rather topping. Not to mention your dismount. I’m Sophronia, by the way.” Sophronia decided to practice a bit of her eyelash-fluttering lesson.

The tall one didn’t seem overly impressed by the eyelashes. “How-d’ye-

do, miss? I'm Phineas B. Crow."

Sophronia gave him a curtsy, and for the first time since she'd arrived at Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing School for Young Ladies of Quality, no one commented on its poor implementation.

"Though everyone calls me Soap," added Phineas B. Crow. "Because I needs it more than most."

Sophronia continued batting her eyelashes at him.

"You got some soot in your eye, there, miss?"

Clearly I haven't mastered the art yet. "No, practicing."

"What, miss?"

"Never you mind."

"That india rubber you got wrapped about them little stompers?" Soap's tone was full of avarice.

"Yes. Got it off a dumbwaiter. But you can't have it; I need it."

"What's an Uptop need with india-rubber shoes?"

"Climbing, of course."

"That how you got here? Never heard of a girl who climbed afore."

Sophronia shrugged, pleased at the compliment. *Soap,* she thought, *has a pleasant smile.*

A yell came from behind them. One of the large men—*Supervisor, most likely*—marched in their direction.

"Oh, blast it," said Soap. "Greaser. Scatter!"

The boys ran in various different directions. Soap tugged Sophronia after him, to crouch down together behind a huge mound of coal.

"We ain't got long back here afore they suss us out."

"Is this what you do all day—shovel coal?"

"Ain't a bad life. Used to work Southampton docks," replied Soap with one of his grins. "Still can't eat fish."

Sophronia said, "You know, it *is* nice to meet you, Mr. Soap. I got myself an unexpected mechanimal, so I imagine I might have to pop down here regularly."

"After the coal, are ya?"

"Rather. Poor Bumbersnoot; he must be starving by now."

"I thought them mechanimals weren't allowed."

"Said he was unexpected, didn't I?"

Soap let out a bark of laughter that was sure to attract attention even in

the noise of the boiler room. “You’re all right for a girl, Miss Sophronia. Pretty, too.”

Sophronia snorted. “I only recently made your acquaintance, Mr. Soap. No need to fib.”

“Whoa ho ho,” said a booming voice, “what have we here?”

Soap stood immediately, his back ramrod straight. Sophronia followed his lead.

“Just taking a breather, sir.”

“Soap, you ain’t never doing *just* nothing. Who’s that you got with ya?”

Sophronia stepped forward. “How do you do, sir? Sophronia Angelina Temminnick.”

“An Uptop? Down ’ere? Best get her along right quick, before the Junior Sixth Assistant Engineer sees ya. I’ll pretend you was never ’ere, shall I?”

“Thank you very much, sir,” said Sophronia with a curtsy.

Soap led her back to the hatch. “He’s not a bad kind of greaser, Old Smalls.”

“It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Soap.”

He twinkled at her. “Aye, it was, miss. Supposing I’ll be seeing you again.”

“Perhaps.” Sophronia let herself out.

Before she could close the hatch, Soap’s dark head stuck out. “Oh, miss, best change that pinafore. Wouldn’t want people knowing you went south.”

Sophronia looked down at her front. The crisp white of her apron was covered in smudges. “You’re probably right.”

In the bright light of the morning sun, Sophronia noticed something else about her new friend. He wasn’t simply dirty; he was actually black. Sophronia had heard, of course, of people with odd-colored skin, but she’d only seen pictures in her papa’s books. She’d never actually met one before. *But Soap is just like a normal boy!*

She wasn’t certain it was polite to mention, but she couldn’t help herself. “Why, you’re all over soot-colored by nature!”

“Yes, miss. A creature from darkest Africa. *Wooo, wooo*.” He weaved his head around, pretending to be a ghost.

Sophronia had read about Africa. This was a subject upon which she was fully conversant. “Oh, my, is that where you’re from?”

“No, miss. Tooting Bec, South London.” At which he returned to the

noisy, musty darkness of the boiler room.

Sophronia made her way back to her quarters safely from balcony to deck, spending only a brief time running through the hallway. No one was awake upon her return except Bumbersnoot. He was absolutely delighted by the piece of coal and dish of water she placed before him. He nibbled and slurped away happily, tooting small gusts of appreciative steam. Sophronia changed her pinafore and checked the state of her face and hands. Luckily, the maids had brought in the washing water and, being mechanicals, had not registered her empty bed. After much scrubbing, most of the boiler room's smudges were eliminated.

She practiced batting her eyelashes in the small hand mirror for the next half hour, until Dimity finally awoke.

"You'll never guess what I did!" said Sophronia while her friend blinked blearily and stretched.

"No, probably not. Could I wake up first, please?"

"Certainly." At which Sophronia paused. She had no idea how to dispose of her dirty bathing water. At home, she would have simply tossed it out the window, but here there was no window to their chamber. She excused herself, took it to the privy, and returned to hand the basin to Dimity.

Dimity poured herself some fresh water out of the pitcher and said, "Well?"

"I visited the land of soot and fire."

"Sophronia, really. Do you mean to traumatize me with riddles first thing in the morning? If so, I should warn you, I'd consider that grounds for rescinding all offers of friendship."

"It's almost noon. I've been up for *ages*."

"A habit you may come to regret." But then Dimity put it all together. She emerged from washing her face with a gasp. "Sophronia! Did you visit the boiler room?"

"Yes!" Sophronia casually leaned back on both elbows.

"You aren't allowed to *do* that!"

"So I learned."

"But all the engine parts down there are *exposed*. A girl can see exactly

how things work. It’s undignified.”

“It’s full of boys.”

Dimity paused, giving that statement its due consideration. “Yes, but the wrong *class* of boy, to be sure? I really wouldn’t if I were you. Terribly bad for one’s reputation. Then again, I don’t suppose there are any *proper* boys on board this school at all.”

“Not unless you count Professor Braithwope.”

“Certainly not. Now, Captain Niall, mind you, I’d count him.”

A knock came at their door. Sidheag stuck her head in. “Breakfast in ten minutes.” The tall girl looked much the same as she had the day before—her dress dowdy and her hair in one simple braid. She positively lounged against the doorjamb.

Sophronia wondered how she would fare during posture class.

“We won’t have him for a few days at least,” said the Lady of Kingair.

“Have who?”

“Captain Niall, of course.”

“Have him for what?”

“Lessons, silly. Did you think they only kept him on retainer for ground support?” With which the tall girl drifted away.

Sophronia and Dimity exchanged startled looks.

“What on earth could we girls possibly learn from a werewolf?” Sophronia wondered.

“How to keep a hat on no matter what the circumstances?” hazarded Dimity.

“We need to nip to the post,” Sophronia stated firmly as they left breakfast.

“We do?” Dimity was confused.

“My soiled glove, remember?” She produced the offending article from her reticule.

“Oh, yes, we were going to send it to my problematical brother for analysis. I should warn you, it’s unlikely anything will come of it. He’s very forgetful, my brother. Rather a nascent absentminded academic.”

Sophronia hesitated a moment, and then approached one of the older girls. “Pardon me, could you point us in the direction of the postal service?”

The girl looked down her nose at her. “Head steward handles that.”

“And where would I find him?”

“Steward’s quarters, of course,” she said and turned away.

I guess we have been dismissed. “Dimity, any idea where the steward’s quarters might be?”

Dimity cocked her head. “Well, on a boat it’s one of the upper decks, midship, you know, to catch people boarding and the like.”

“But we boarded from below.”

“True.”

Sophronia frowned. The steward would be in charge of all the mechanicals for servicing and maintenance, as well as all the human household staff. “We need to find the main hub.”

“Follow the tracks?” suggested Dimity, pointing down to where the single track became multiples at the entrance to the dining hall, allowing various maid and footman mechanicals to service the tables.

The servants’ quarters of any house are an odd place to explore, full of derelict machinery and broken tracks, not to mention the personal items of the human staff. Not wishing to be late to class, Sophronia and Dimity moved along the main hallways quickly, following the track when it split off and delved to the side into what was clearly a servants’ area.

“Uh-oh, look,” Dimity said, pointing.

Ahead of them, rounding a far corner in the narrow hall, they could see the back of some very flowery skirts of the kind no human maid, and certainly no mechanical, would wear. It was a dress familiar to them both, for there had been praise of it over breakfast.

“Monique,” hissed Sophronia. “I wager she’s trying to get a message off the ship, too.”

Dimity nodded wisely. “To tell her contacts the location of the prototype, perhaps?”

“Or warn them of the delay. If I were her, I’d wait until I was free to hand it over in person. Too many other people want it. Any message, even one in code, could be intercepted.”

They drew back and followed the older girl at a discreet distance.

Peeking round the corner of the next corridor, they spotted her entering a large white door and closing it firmly behind her. After an exchange of glances, Sophronia and Dimity ran to the door. On it were written the words

STEWARD'S OFFICE, CORRESPONDENCES SENT AND RECEIVED, MECHANICAL MISBEHAVIORS HANDLED, NO SILLINESS.

Sophronia cracked the door, and the two girls put their ears to the gap.

"But we must be going near Bunson's before then!" they heard Monique whine.

"Not for three weeks at the very least, miss."

"But I must get a message home to my mama. It is vital. This season's glove order!"

"I understand, miss, and yet, the float is away, nothing to be done."

"Couldn't Captain Niall…?"

"The captain is not your personal message boy, young lady."

Monique switched to a more wheedling tone. "Well, could I leave it with you, to send as soon as possible?"

"I can't make any guarantees, miss."

Sophronia pushed Dimity away from the door and down the corridor. It seemed like the conversation would be ending soon. They made it round the corner just in time to hear the door open and peek out to see Monique striding quickly, and in a most unladylike manner, back the way they had come. She was clutching a letter in one hand, clearly having decided against leaving the missive in the dubious care of the steward.

"I bet he has to report messages to one of the teachers," said Dimity.

"Or one of them has him on the payroll," said Sophronia.

"Bribery? How crass."

"Useful, though."

"Shall we still try to send the glove?"

Sophronia considered the dangers and implications. "Best not, I think. Try again later. We're late for class."

THE TEACHING HABITS OF WEREWOLVES

The schedule proceeded much of a pace after the chaos of that first day. Sophronia came to accept the un-finishing-school aspects of Mademoiselle Geraldine's. The lessons were mostly un-lesson-like, the teachers were mainly un-teacher-like, and the routine was more that of a London dandy than that of any proper educational system.

The girls commenced their mornings—which were really early afternoons—with a light repast, nothing too heavy, on the insistence of Mademoiselle Geraldine. "Breakfast," she said, bosom heaving, "should *never* be luxurious." Thus all they had to select from was tea, bread and sweet butter, porridge, ham and broiled mushrooms, rabbit pie, fricandeau of eggs, mayonnaise of prawns, and spiced beef. "Now, ladies," said the headmistress every day from the front table. "I know this is quite the meager selection, but breakfast comestibles should be undisruptive, nutritive, and effortlessly digested. You must watch your figures. *Watch them!*"

Sophronia, uncertain how she might do such a thing, ate bites between staring down at her own chest, and selected only what she might have eaten back at home—a little porridge with molasses. They all ate meals together, although separated into tables by age or inclination. The dining hall was stretched to capacity with four dozen or so students, plus assorted teachers. The ship's complement and personal staff ate beforehand, of course, and the sooties and other menial laborers ate belowdecks.

After breakfast, all the girls stood to recite, with religious solemnity, the

school motto—*ut acerbus terminus*—three times over.

"What does it mean?" Sophronia wanted to know.

"'To the bitter end,' imbecile," said Monique de Pelouse.

After breakfast they were separated according to skill level and drifted off to their first set of lessons. Three days a week the debuts took mathematics and household management with Sister Mathilde, along with a number of older girls. They learned more in the manner of lists and organization than sums calculated on slates. There were no apparent exams, and yet Sophronia found herself intrigued into learning simply by the puzzles Sister Mathilde proposed. Algebra was far more interesting when it was a matter of proportioning out mutton chops so as to poison only half of one's dinner guests and then determining the relative value of purchasing a more expensive, yet more effective, antidote over a home remedy. Sophronia was a mite disturbed by the context, but could not help being intrigued by the macabre nature of the calculations.

On the other two days, they had physical culture with Lady Linette during the first time slot. This involved, much to Sophronia's shock, climbing, running, and even some light tumbling—in petticoats. There were also battledore and shuttlecock, tennis, croquet, pass the slipper, and wink-wink. Sophronia had the advantage of brothers. *Who would have thought I should ever consider them an advantage?* Which turned her, as Monique pointed out disgustedly, into rather a sporting lady.

"Ugh, Sophronia, you're so very country," she said.

"Well, yes, I was raised there." *At least I don't have horsey teeth, like you!*

"Next you'll be crying out, 'Tallyho!' from the squeak deck."

"Oh, now, be fair. Only when I have the dogs out after you, dearest Monique." Sophronia grinned slyly, and Monique gave her a nasty look.

Lady Linette completed a somersault across the carpet, ending in front of them and causing Sophronia and Monique to snap their mouths closed and pay attention. She seemed almost embarrassed as she guided them through the steps. "Now, ladies, remember this is for use only when strictly necessary, and you must be absolutely certain not to muss your hair. For the most part, you should delegate physical exertions to a willing, or unwilling, accomplice. We will discuss bribery and blackmail techniques later. Alternatively, you might arrange things so that fleshy activity does not

become necessary at all. However, a lady is always prepared. Speaking of which, show me your handkerchiefs!”

The girls all stopped what they were doing, which had been preparing—in various states of distress or, in Sophronia’s case, delight—to try their own versions of the somersault, and began patting about for handkerchiefs.

“What did I tell you yesterday? A lady *always* has her handkerchief on her person. A handkerchief is endlessly useful. Not only is it a communication device, but it can also be dropped as a distraction, scented with various perfumes and noxious gases for discombobulation, used to wipe the forehead of a gentleman, or even bandage a wound, and, of course, you may dab at the eyes or nose if it is still clean. Dab, mind you! Never blow. I don’t tell you these things for my own amusement, ladies. Now, books on heads while I do the inspection.”

The girls produced handkerchiefs from various pockets and held them up, at the same time placing books atop their heads for balance and posture.

Lady Linette, blonde curls bobbing, marched among them examining the offerings closely.

“Very good, Monique. Perfect, as always. Next time, Sidheag, smaller handkerchief. A lady carries embroidered muslin, not—what on earth is that? A square of tweed? Really, girl! Dimity, watch your balance, and red? Dear, not *red*. You’re not ready for red. Red is only for the advanced deployment of handkerchiefs. Preshea, why the discoloration? Have you been experimenting with poison again? Next time, don’t use your good handkerchief. Agatha!”

Poor Agatha lost her balance while waiting, causing the books atop her head to tumble to the ground. She reeled into Sophronia. Both girls fell over backward.

Sophronia giggled.

Agatha looked both terrified and mortified.

Lady Linette tsked. “Ladies. Ladies!”

So the lessons continued, with Monique garnering the most praise, and even being excused from class early on occasion for her good behavior. It was all very vexing.

Once a week, the after-breakfast lesson was deceit with Mademoiselle Geraldine, which the headmistress *thought* was a “getting-to-know-you session” and which the girls knew was really training in the fine art of

engaging in conversation without actually saying anything.

In the afternoon came tea and social discourse. After tea, they practiced various parlor games and played cards among themselves in the dining hall while the teachers either joined in or circulated, offering critique. Sophronia learned quickly that Sidheag was particularly adept at cards and that Agatha was no good at all. Preshea knew by heart all the different flavors of sherry and what ought to be stocked for gentlemen to imbibe, and Monique was a horrible whist partner.

Following this, they had the history of social discourse from one of any number of teachers, which seemed mainly to be comprised of reading in the library.

Then came dinner. This was followed by a seemingly endless round of dancing, drawing, music, dress, and the modern languages with Lady Linette, Sister Mathilde—whom everyone quickly began referring to as Sister Mattie—or, after the sun had set, Professor Braithwope. Incorporated into these lessons were the fine arts of death, diversion, and the modern weaponries.

Supper occurred promptly at ten each night. Then there was a small spate of spare time, which, due to the amount of extra work and rote memorization they were assigned throughout the day, Sophronia soon deduced was purely mythical. A few additional lessons, and the gas was turned off at two.

Sophronia came to realize that despite a near-constant exhaustion in mind and body, she was very much enjoying herself. She loved the lessons in espionage and deceit—so many possibilities!—and remained only a smidge disturbed by the analytical approach to murder. This kind of finishing school was rather more engaging than the one she had imagined, although she couldn’t quite determine *why* she was there. It occurred to her that perhaps all finishing schools were like this—after all, Preshea discussed poisonings as if they were commonplace—but she rejected that idea. She may not yet be fully educated in the finer arts of being a proper lady, but she was smart enough to realize that her sisters wouldn’t put much stock in finishing schools were they all this subversive.

After two weeks of such lessons, Sophronia drummed up the courage to ask Lady Linette about the matter of her unusual education. She waited patiently until after their lesson with Sister Mattie on buttermilk—for use in

whitening lace and coating the stomach—in order to catch the teacher alone. Lady Linette had just finished with a group of the senior students on some mysterious French letter-writing technique that had even the oldest of the girls red-faced and tittering as they left the room.

"Lady Linette, may I have a moment of your time?"

"Oh, Miss Temminnick. Certainly. How may I help you?"

"Would it be terribly forward of me to ask quite a direct question?"

"Well, it would certainly be against your training thus far. We haven't yet covered the manipulation of conversation by applying provocateur diplomacy. However, I suppose I might excuse an uncontrolled query this once."

Sophronia took a deep breath. "What, precisely, will I be expected to learn here?"

Lady Linette twirled one curl of blonde hair around the tip of one finger. "Information gathering and object retrieval, of course. But mostly, you should learn how to finish."

"Finish what, exactly?"

"Why, anything or anyone who needs finishing, my dear."

Sophronia shuffled her feet. When Lady Linette's forehead creased at the movement, Sophronia stilled and said, "Ah, yes, you see, it is not that I am unaware of the honor of your taking me in even though I haven't the connections of the other girls, but…"

"Go on."

"I'm not certain I could do *it*."

"Do what, dear?"

"Kill someone in cold blood."

Lady Linette's cornflower-blue eyes crinkled. "Ah, yes, but how do you know until you try?"

"I suppose that's true."

"Besides, dear, you don't have to do it face-to-face; there is always poison. And many of our graduates never harm anyone. It will depend on your particular situation after you leave us. It always does. For the ones who marry have a different path from the ones who don't."

"If you don't mind my asking, Lady Linette, how did you know to recruit me?"

"Ah, now, my dear, that is part of your training. You will have reached

quite a level of comprehension if you manage to determine that truth all on your own.” Lady Linette looked away.

Sophronia wanted to say something about the prototype, but she knew when she was being dismissed. She bobbed a curtsy. “Thank you, my lady.”

Lady Linette winced. “Miss Temminneck, arrange after-hours lessons with Professor Braithwope, do. We really must work on that curtsy of yours, dear.”

“But I have advanced eyelash fluttering to practice, and a mathematics problem concerning how to order strychnine *and* a lamb dinner on a limited budget, and three chapters on court etiquette to read, and my handkerchief to starch, and the quadrille to memorize!”

“No one said learning etiquette *and* espionage would be easy, my dear.”

At the end of the third week, after supper, all the girls in the entire school collected on one of the lower decks instead of going to evening classes. There was a general air of excited anticipation, and the massive airship began to sink slowly toward the bland green of the moor. Eventually it almost touched the heath, it was so low. *I thought it wasn’t supposed to land*, Sophronia thought. She was careful to disguise her apprehension. From what little she had seen in the boiler room, she wasn’t certain the school *could* land.

The girls all trooped down to the warehouse bay, where the glass platform awaited them. It was not to be utilized, however. Professor Braithwope, demonstrating his vampiric strength with a kind of embarrassed deference, pushed the massive platform aside, exposing the large hole in the bottom of the ship.

Older girls first, the students sat down around the edge of the hole, legs dangling, and simply jumped to the grass below. Most landed with small graceful bends, like a deep curtsy. One or two tumbled forward and bounced to their feet in the manner Lady Linette had demonstrated. “From my days on the stage,” she’d said.

Sophronia, Monique, and Sidheag jumped down without fuss, but the other debuts were nowhere near as committed to proving themselves. Both Agatha and Dimity had to be pushed.

Sophronia kept a careful eye on Monique in case she did, in fact, still

have the prototype on her person and was planning to stash it behind some shrub or rock. This was, after all, the first time they had been to ground in weeks. But Monique remained a model student, in her way, surrounding herself with a group of stylish older girls and showing no indication of subterfuge beyond that normally required by lessons at Mademoiselle Geraldine's.

Captain Niall stood waiting for them. The girls all gathered around him in an excited, giggling throng. *Two score*, estimated Sophronia.

He raised up his hands, grinning amiably.

A number of feminine sighs were emitted at the cheeky twinkle in that grin. The werewolf once again wore a top hat tied to his head and a massive leather greatcoat, which flapped in the wind of the moor. As before, his feet were bare, and even though the coat was fully buttoned, it was clear he wore neither collar nor neck cloth underneath.

Sophronia suspected that many of the sighs and a good deal of the titillation resulted from the certain knowledge that he was entirely naked beneath that coat.

"Ladies, ladies, settle down, please. For the debuts among you, let me quickly say that as you only have me for lessons on an irregular basis, everyone is taught the same lesson together. And today we are addressing knives!" He said this last with a dramatic flourish.

A wave of murmurs and gasps percolated through the crowd.

The captain moved off to a low cluster of boulders, on top of which he had placed a long leather case. This he unrolled to display several knives of differing styles and materials. The girls gasped in appreciative horror.

He returned to face them, clutching three knives in one hand, displayed like a fan. "Don't like knives?" He pretended to fan himself with the blades and fluttered his long eyelashes at them.

Sophronia wondered if he might be slightly unhinged.

Dimity said, "But sir, aren't blades for gentlemen?"

"Ah, excellent starting place. In fact, no. Knives can be quite useful to a lady of quality. Swords are for men; they are too easily caught in the skirts. Knifework is far superior for ladies of your position. With fashion as it currently stands, there is always a way for a woman of style to hide a knife about her person. Over the next few months we will cover concealment and how to draw without mussing the trim of your dress. We will delve into

blade sizes, applications, and materials. We will discuss silver versus wood and the best place to strike a vampire versus a werewolf. You will learn some hand-to-hand combat, subversive attacks, and, of course, how to throw. Questions?"

Sidheag's hand shot up.

"Yes, Lady Kingair?" Captain Niall did not look surprised, although this was the first time Sophronia had ever seen the tall girl show any interest in any lesson, be it feminine wiles, hidden messages, or deadly deeds.

"What about artillery?"

"Not my subject."

"But you must have had military service," protested Sidheag.

Captain Niall took that as a teaching point. "Will someone please explain why Lady Kingair made that particular assumption? Yes, Miss Pelouse."

"Because all werewolves in England are required to serve Her Majesty." Monique wore a simpering smirk.

Sophronia said, under her breath to Dimity, "Look at her, so smart! And the fact that he's called *Captain* Niall isn't a hint?"

Dimity hid a smirk.

Captain Niall gave Sophronia a look.

Oh, right, supernatural. He probably heard that. Sophronia could feel herself flushing.

The werewolf continued. "I would like you all to please spread apart and find yourselves a nice stick that will work for some preliminary fighting. Ten minutes, ladies, and we will reconvene over yonder."

Anticipating this relocation, the airship had drifted to hover over a flat rise and now floated several stories above the ground. The glass platform had been lowered and turned into a massive gas lamp. It utilized a kind of swirling yellow gas that lit up the heath, allowing the lesson to be conducted with all the grandeur of a ball under a chandelier.

The girls broke apart.

Sophronia and Dimity followed Sidheag's lead and made for a convenient shrub. There was no point in feeling about the heath in the dark for sticks. They all selected branches from the bush, ripping them off. Their selections were quintessentially to character. Sidheag wanted a nice big stick. Dimity broke off what she considered the most shapely branch and

commented upon the bush's aesthetic qualities. Sophronia chose one that fit her hand relatively well but wasn't as big as anyone else's. Thus far all the lessons at this school had involved some element of subterfuge, and if the captain asked them to hide their sticks on their personages, she didn't want to be, well, stuck. She worried over this decision. *Sophronia,* she finally told herself firmly, *don't overthink the matter.*

They reassembled in a row. It was fascinating to see the whole school thus arrayed. Sophronia and the younger girls stood at one end in pinafores and pantalettes. The older girls, with their hair turned up and their skirts full-length, stood at the other. Except Monique, who stuck out like a very angry sore thumb among the debuts. Sophronia counted forty-five students in all.

Captain Niall walked along the row, examining the sticks.

When he got to Dimity he took the stick from her. "An interesting choice."

"I like the shape and smoothness," said Dimity.

"Not the best reason I have ever heard for choosing a knife, but not the worst, either. We will go over workmanship next week. Selecting a knife is like choosing a quality pair of gloves—appearance is important, but how it has been put together accounts for most of its function and duration."

Dimity nodded and he returned the stick to her.

He turned to Sophronia. "Why so small?"

"I thought you might ask us to hide it."

"Interesting reasoning." With no additional comment, he moved on.

Sophronia let out a shaky sigh. She told herself that this was because she was not yet accustomed to the fact that he was a werewolf. Professor Braithwope's vampiric nature was now routine, but Captain Niall was still wild and mysterious. *And he smells funny.* In actual fact, Sophronia wanted to impress him because everyone else seemed so taken with the man.

He took Sidheag's stick, one eyebrow raised. "Like large sticks, do you, Lady Kingair?"

Sidheag shrugged like a boy, but Sophronia could tell the tall girl was hiding a smile.

"Know how to use it?" Captain Niall sniffed. Not in the way that a lady might sniff when offended by a comment, but in the way of a dog, tasting the air.

Then he tossed the stick at Sidheag, causing Sophronia to flinch. Sidheag, however, caught it with one hand, as though expecting just such a violent action.

The werewolf produced a knife from his greatcoat pocket—a short-bladed, all-wooden weapon, carved from mahogany.

"Oooh," said Dimity. "How pretty!"

"For vampires, of course," said Monique, trying to impress, but Captain Niall wasn't listening to her.

Sidheag, grinning, stepped forward out of the line.

The girls murmured in confusion.

Sidheag lunged first. Using her stick as though it were actually a bladed weapon, she slashed out at the werewolf. It was not a wild slash, either, of the kind Sophronia and her brothers played at with fake swords.

Sophronia watched with interest, partly from a learning perspective and partly because Sidheag was exposing more of her character now than she had over the past weeks of intimate acquaintance. She'd been trained by someone who actually knew how to fight.

"Sidheag even moves like a boy!" commented Dimity.

"Yes, but she's *good*, isn't she?" Sophronia was favorably impressed. *Better than my brothers, that's certain!*

Preshea wanted to know, "What high-rank lady gets that kind of training?"

"A lady by title only." Monique crossed her arms and stuck her nose in the air.

Captain Niall was holding himself back. *He must be. He is a werewolf, after all, and twice as fast as even the most highly trained soldier.* He was also ten times as strong, if the legends were to be believed. *Nevertheless, Sidheag isn't at all bad. She keeps her stick in motion, always pressing forward, looking for a hole in her opponent's defenses.*

After a few minutes, Captain Niall called a halt to the impromptu match.

"Very interesting, Lady Kingair. I sense some of your"—he paused delicately—"*father's* training."

Sidheag inclined her head and resumed her place in line.

Sophronia, Dimity, Preshea, and Agatha all turned to stare at her, mouths slightly agape.

"I guess we found ourselves a teacher's pet," said Monique. "Then

again, can you be a pet to a werewolf?”

“Oh, now, Miss Pelouse, I understand that playing favorites with professors is more *your* approach,” Sidheag shot back.

“Now, ladies, what you really want is to never get into the kind of situation Lady Kingair and I just demonstrated. You *never* want to actually engage with a rival. Your greatest advantage is surprise. Make the decision to strike first and with intent, and—if you will excuse the pun—stick to it. Miss Pelouse, if you would like to demonstrate?”

Monique moved forward, head held high, a small smile on her face.

Captain Niall approached her.

Monique, instead of striking out in the manner of Sidheag, stepped in toward the werewolf. She commented on the pleasantness of the night and the beauty of the countryside. She fluttered her eyelashes in a way Sophronia had come to recognize as very advanced. *I should never have thought there would be a time when I would envy another girl’s eyelash manipulation.*

Playing her game, Captain Niall leaned in. He flirted back. He looked deeply into her eyes.

Monique struck him hard in the side of the neck with her stick, behind and below the ear. A stick that she had, somehow, sharpened into a point.

It speared into the werewolf’s body half an inch at least.

Blood leaked out around the stick.

Captain Niall winced and gave a little gasp of pain. “Ah. Yes. Very good, Miss Pelouse.”

Sophronia gasped herself, raising a hand to her mouth in horror. A small, untraumatized part of her wondered why Monique had not displayed such skill when faced with flywaymen. *Had she wanted them to kidnap her?*

Several of the other girls gave little mewling cries of distress.

Captain Niall reached up and pulled the stick out of his neck. Blood oozed forth, but not of the color or quantity that Sophronia expected. It was darker, almost black, and slower. Then, right before her eyes, the wound began to heal and close.

The werewolf handed the bloody stick back to Monique, who took it with a little curtsy.

Dimity fell facedown into the grass in a dead faint.

Sophronia crouched over her friend and with a gesture signaled Sidheag

to help.

The tall girl bent down, and under cover of the hum of confusion, Sophronia asked, “What did you mean by that? What you said to Monique?”

Sidheag looked at her, assessing. “Only that the rumor is she has an advocate among the teachers.”

“Like a patron?”

“Very like.”

“Who?”

“No one knows.”

Sophronia nodded, then turned back to Dimity. Someone passed over the sal volatile, and soon enough, her friend’s soft brown eyes blinked open. Sophronia helped Dimity to sit, and while she did so whispered in one ear, “Monique has an advocate on staff. I think that’s how she’s managed to keep the prototype location secret.”

Dimity looked at her, still recovering. “Really, Sophronia, it makes me most uncomfortable how you manage to sort everything out every time I faint.”

How Not to Flirt

Sidheag, why does Captain Niall behave differently around you?" Sophronia had decided that her tactics with Sidheag ought to imitate those she used when handling her brothers. *Direct questions, lack of delicacy, and a general roughness of manner is clearly called for.* Consequently, the two girls were developing some kind of a relationship. It could not precisely be termed *friendly*, but Sidheag was less hostile to Sophronia than she was to most everyone else.

The girls were gathered in their parlor, practicing discarding gloves *with purpose*, during a moment of peace before bed.

Sidheag didn't even look at Sophronia. "I dinna ken your meaning."

"Oh, yes, you do."

Sidheag sighed. "I was raised by wolves."

"Yes, so Monique intimated."

"No, literally. Kingair Castle is a werewolf holding. Lord Maccon isn't my father; he's my great-great-great-great-grandfather. And he's still alive. He was bitten after he had already bred."

Sophronia blinked in startlement, and not in the correct eyelash-fluttering manner. Lady Linette would have been most upset. "That must be odd."

"You have no idea."

Dimity tilted her head. "Are they all soldiers? Like Captain Niall?"

"Of course."

"Well, that explains your conduct," said Monique snidely.

Sophronia looked at Monique. “I’d watch your tongue if I were you. Sidheag here is rather adept with weapons, and judging from our flywaymen experience, you are not.”

“Why, thank you very much, Sophronia.” Sidheag actually looked like she was trying to blush at the compliment. *Trying, mind you.*

“My,” snipped Monique, “aren’t you two chummy.”

“I know the very idea is well outside of your capacities, Monique. Do you actually have any friends?” retorted Sophronia.

Dimity gasped and then jumped in to temper the insult by diverting the conversation. Dimity was, as a general rule, a very nice person. “Is Captain Niall like other werewolves?”

Sidheag’s brow quirked. “How do you mean?”

Dimity only blushed. She, unlike Sidheag, had almost mastered the skill. Her round porcelain cheeks darkened, and no flush extended to any other part of her face. She did it so well she was under orders from Lady Linette to learn how to better control the timing. “When someone blushes as prettily as you do, my dear, one must become proficient at exact execution!”

Sophronia looked accusingly at Dimity. “I thought your parents were progressive!”

“They are, but that doesn’t mean I’ve met many werewolves before now.”

“No?”

“Well, any, even.”

Sidheag laughed. “Believe me, they dinna act all wonderful en masse.”

“His wound healing like that was remarkable,” said Sophronia.

“Oh, *don’t*, Sophronia.” Dimity put a hand to her head and looked pale.

Preshea said, “I hear they make the best… ooh la la.” She wiggled her torso suggestively.

Sophronia could feel her face heating at the very thought, and she knew for a fact that *her* blush wasn’t pretty at all. It mashed in with her freckles and made her look feverish and blotchy. She was under orders not to blush at all if possible.

“Practice, I suppose,” said Sidheag, deadpan.

“Had some personal experience, have you?” needled Monique.

“Dinna be disgusting. Pack is family!” Sidheag looked revolted, which

only encouraged Monique.

“Wagging tails at you, were they?”

Sophronia jumped in to rescue Sidheag before the girl did something violent. “It must have been a fascinating childhood, being raised in a pack.”

“It was more like having six assorted fathers with very decided opinions on upbringing.”

Dimity perked up. “Really? Strict parents? Mine, too. What about your mum?”

Sidheag shook her head. “That’s why they sent me here; all of them were between wives. Gramps decided I was getting a mite unfeminine and needed polish.”

“Imagine that,” said Monique. “Me agreeing with a werewolf.”

Dimity said, “You might be better off not having polish. Mummy finished here, so there was no chance I could avoid it. But you’re a lady already by rights; why not go off and have a proper ladylike life? Mummy says I daydream overmuch and I ought to learn to kill something once in a while. But you don’t have to.”

“Except you keep fainting,” pointed out Sophronia.

“True. I’m afraid I’m doomed to be a terrible disappointment to her.”

Sidheag grimaced. “There’s my advantage. Old Gramps dinna know how a young lady ought to behave, so he’s bound to be pleased by any improvement.”

“Even if only a very minor one?” Monique added.

“Exactly!” Sidheag said with a grin, choosing to ignore the insult. She had quite a nice smile; it crinkled the edges of her strange yellow eyes. Sophronia wondered if those eyes had to do with her werewolf ancestry.

Bumbersnoot came waddling in.

The girls continued dropping gloves and indicating the drop with a slide of the eye and lowering of the lid. It quickly became a matter of then rushing to pick them up, as Bumbersnoot seemed to think this a lovely new game. He would try to get to the fallen gloves first and swallow them, at which juncture they would have to wait for him to emit them out the other end—that is, if they went into his storage compartment, and not his boiler.

“Oh, really!” exclaimed Preshea in distress when she was not quite fast enough. Bumbersnoot got to her lavender glove first and smeared it with a drop of boiling drool from his internal steam engine before she was able to

pull it away.

“I don’t know why you keep that thing around,” said Monique. “It’s a terrible nuisance, and I’m certain you’re going to be in masses of trouble if anyone finds out.”

“You going to tell?”

Monique took deep offense. “I’m not a snitch!”

“Your one redeeming character trait?”

“Oh, la,” said Monique. “I happen to enjoy being flawless.”

“Don’t you think he’s moving slower than before?” Dimity wondered, reaching down to pat the top of the little mechanimal’s head. Bumbersnoot’s tail began to tick-tock in pleasure, but it did seem less rapid than usual.

Sophronia frowned down at her pet in concern. “He probably needs to be fed.” She’d not managed to visit the sooties again. Someone else had been thinking of Bumbersnoot’s health, however, for last week one of the mechanical servants had appeared at their door with a platter. Upon lifting the silver lid, the girls found a small mound of coal and nothing else. Not even a note. Sophronia had surmised both whom the platter was for and whom it was from. She also surmised that it was now her turn to visit Soap to renew the acquaintance and extend her gratitude.

She’d not mentioned the sooties to anyone but Dimity, and even then not in any detail. Dimity had been rather dismissive, and Sophronia figured it was best to keep the sooties to herself when possible.

As they watched, Bumbersnoot’s interest in the fallen gloves waned and the flow of steam from his underbelly began to slow. He sagged down, and his tail stopped moving.

“Oh, dear,” said Dimity. “Poor little mite.”

Sophronia waited until the others were asleep before climbing out of her cot, pulling on a dressing gown, and letting herself into the hall. The gaslights were doused for the evening, and it took valuable moments for her eyes to adjust to the gloom.

As soon as they did so, she made out a shape that caused her heart to pound in her breast. It was the conical metal form of a mechanical maid. The creature was stilled in its tracks, with no steam escaping from under the

crude white pinafore someone had dressed it in. It was either dead or asleep. Nevertheless, the maid was between Sophronia and any possible access to the outer hull of the airship. *I wish I knew more about the workings of these faceless mechanicals. Can it see me, the way Frowbritcher could see me, or will it only notice when I'm in its way? Does it matter if I move slow? Or fast?*

Sophronia decided to simply proceed with as much caution as possible. She flattened herself against the wall and inched toward the maid, attempting not to step on the tracks, worried that any vibration might transfer to the mechanical.

She moved closer and closer, and then, sucking in to make herself as skinny as possible—glad she was in her nightgown and not full skirts—inched past the maid.

The mechanical did not stir. Sophronia made it. Throwing caution to the wind, she took off down the hallway.

At that, the maid whirled to life and came after her, far faster than any household mechanical Sophronia's mother had on staff. No alarm sounded, however. Sophronia charged through a door and onto an outside deck, past another slumbering mechanical, and slid nimbly over the railing to hang suspended on the other side.

The mechanical on the deck also awoke as she passed. It was a footman model, faceless like the others, but wearing an old-fashioned manservant's white lace cravat. The cravat fluttered as the mechanical's internal steam engine puffed to life. It began trundling back and forth. However, it did not sound the alarm, either, and its tracks did not allow it to spot Sophronia on the other side of the railing.

Sophronia barely breathed. She noticed that the previous weeks' book-balancing, dancing, and lessons with Captain Niall had given her new muscles and better balance. She found this position far more comfortable than she had the first time around.

She also found that edging along the outside of the rails, jumping from deck to balcony to deck, was far easier. *This school really is training me.*

She flung herself, almost automatically, at Lady Linette's private balcony—the one with the rope ladder. From there she climbed down and into the hatch of the boiler room with a sense of relief. At least this part of the ship did not house any professors. She was liking the school rather more

than she had thought possible and would prefer not to be asked to leave just yet. She was fairly certain that pursuit of food for an illicit mechanimal was not an acceptable activity.

The boiler room was far quieter at night than it had been during the day. But it was still active. The massive ship had to be kept afloat, and the balloons must be augmented by both heat and propeller action. Plus, Sophronia had to assume, much of the rest of the ship ran on steam power—the kitchens, the gas containment, the glass platform, the lighting, the heating, the tea.

She had intended merely to sneak in, liberate some coal, and sneak out—a plan far simpler to execute when the outside of the ship was as dark as the inside. But someone observed her stealthy entrance, and even as Sophronia was straightening up, the small, cherubic face of a young boy appeared next to her elbow, grinning.

"Well, well! Who are *you*, then?" The boy had a bit of a French accent and a very cheeky demeanor. He was also much younger than any of the other sooties, with remarkably twinkly eyes. Sophronia suspected those eyes of being green, but it was impossible to tell by the light of the boilers. He had dark, cropped hair, trousers that were too big, and an upmarket-looking cap. An incongruous character all round. He was also slightly less smudged than any sootie Sophronia had seen before. *Only slightly, mind.*

"Good evening," said Sophronia. "I'm a friend of Soap's."

"Who isn't?"

"Point taken. I'm Sophronia."

"I heard of you. The Uptop Soap's sweet on." The boy grinned at Sophronia again, showing dimples.

"How old are you?" was all Sophronia could think of to say to *that*.

"Nine," said the boy, sidling up to her.

"Are you a sootie?"

"Nope." The boy winked. Actually winked!

"Then what are you doing down here?"

"I like it here."

"How'd you get in?"

"Came in, like you."

"You from up top as well?"

"Sort of."

Frustrated, Sophronia said, “I only came for some coal.”

“Well, let me go wake Soap.”

“Oh, no need to disturb him.”

“’Course there’s need. Why do you think I was set to watch the hatch? Waiting on the ghost of boilers past? He’ll box my ears if I don’t tell him you came.”

“What’s your name?” Sophronia felt no compunction about disregarding proper introductions with a child.

“They call me Vieve.”

“Odd name.”

“Suits me.”

“Right. I’m going to go over there and get some coal. Does that meet with your approval, Vieve?”

Vieve gave her another one of his dimpled grins and scampered off, holding his trousers up with one hand. He returned moments later, before Sophronia had a chance to collect any coal, with a sleepy Soap in tow.

They made for an odd pair: the scamp of a nine-year-old in overlarge clothing and the tall, gangly sootie with shirtsleeves so short his wrists poked out the ends.

“Good evening, miss.” Soap’s face lit up with that wide, white-toothed smile.

“Are you well, Soap?”

“Well and good, miss, well and good. Got my little meal, did ya?”

“Yes, thank you. Bumbersnoot and I were most appreciative.”

“Bumbersnoot?” wondered Vieve.

“The miss here’s landed herself a mechanimal.”

The young boy’s face lit up. “You have a real live mechanimal! Can I see it?”

“Well, no, not right now. He’s in my room, up in the students’ section.”

“No, I mean later. Can I see it later?”

Soap explained the boy’s evident enthusiasm. “Vieve here is fixing to be the next great inventor.”

Sophronia was shocked. “That’s a grand ambition for someone your age.”

“Not when your aunt is Beatrice Lefoux.” Soap twisted his mobile mouth into a funny grimace.

Sophronia flinched at that statement, glaring down at the nine-year-old before her. “Your *aunt* is Professor Lefoux! Why didn’t you say?”

Vieve shrugged in a way that managed to look particularly French. “Why should I?”

“You won’t tell her, will you?”

“Tell her what?”

“About Bumbersnoot? Or my being in the boiler room?”

“’Course not. Why would I?” Vieve looked offended.

“Oh, thank you.”

“So *now* can I see your mechanimal?”

Feeling as though she had been somehow trapped, Sophronia said, “Yes, very well. How will you get up to my room, though?”

“Oh, I get round most anywhere I wants.”

“No one bothers to keep track of this scamp,” Soap said, pulling off the boy’s cap and ruffling his hair in a manner Vieve clearly found unnecessary and annoying.

“Are you not a real Uptop?” Sophronia felt a little silly using the word.

Vieve shrugged again. “I’m whatever I want to be, so long as alarms don’t sound.”

“That must be nice.” Sophronia exchanged a look of amusement with Soap.

“Get a small stock of black for the lady, would you, Vieve?” Soap tilted his head in the direction of a mound of coal.

Vieve gave the tall boy a measured look and then trotted purposefully off.

“Arrogant little blighter,” said Soap affectionately, once the lad was out of earshot.

“I suppose you’d have to be, if Professor Lefoux were your aunt.” Sophronia was philosophical.

Vieve returned with his pockets bulging. Sophronia transferred the coal to her black velvet reticule. It was her very best evening bag, but it was the only one that wouldn’t show coal smudges.

“Nice keeper,” Vieve commented on the reticule.

“Thank you.”

“Vieve here has an eye for accessories.”

“I like a nice hat on a lady,” was Vieve’s dignified response, with which

he trundled off about his own business.

“Nine years old, you say?”

“Well, when your only ma is French and a Lefoux, gotta develop some ways to cope. That barrow contraption of mine, the one you saw last time you was here? That’s Vieve’s.”

Sophronia was impressed. “I thought you built it.”

“Nope, I tested it. Vieve’s got the brains.”

Sophronia tilted her head and looked up at the tall young man. “I don’t know about that.”

Soap pulled at one ear self-consciously. “Why… miss.”

Sophronia was trying to come up with a way to extract herself from what appeared to be an awkward conversation—*That’ll teach me to try flirting outside the classroom*—when one of the boilers nearby sparked to roaring life and far away she heard the clang of alarm bells on the upper decks.

“Oh, blast it! Do you think they noticed I wasn’t abed?”

Soap hustled her over to the exit hatch and held it wide while Sophronia climbed out. “No, miss, that’s a perimeter alarm, that is. School’s under attack. Technically, you’re supposed to stay put, here with us.”

“If I’m going to get caught, I’d just as soon it was outside. Better for my reputation.”

“My thinking exactly. Good luck, miss.”

Must be flywaymen, back for the prototype. Sophronia slung the reticule full of coal around her neck and climbed up the rope ladder. On the positive side, none of the teachers would still be in their rooms. On the negative side, she might well encounter any number of them on deck as she tried to make her way back to her own quarters.

She considered hiding out on Lady Linette’s balcony until the alarm stopped, but if this was the promised attack from the flywaymen, she wanted to see what would happen next. They had threatened to return three weeks after the first aborted attempt, but the school must have eluded them an extra few days. The school’s aimless floating on the winds of the misty moor made it as difficult to track from the air as it was from the ground.

Sophronia began to climb steadily up the side of the ship. It was tougher

going straight up than moving around the side. She had to find handholds and footholds in the woodwork to get through the points where one deck met the hull and another jutted out again. She managed it, mainly by not looking down. Once past the midpoint, she consoled herself with the thought, *Even if I do fall, I'll land on a lower deck, with probably nothing more dramatic than a broken bone or two.* It was small consolation.

She looked up. She could see the squeak deck above her. The soldier mechanicals were once more assembled, their little cannons out and pointed inward. Professor Braithwope no doubt stood in the middle with his crossbow. The attackers, if there were any visible, were around the other side of the hull, out of her view.

Sophronia climbed until she was on the level directly below the squeak deck. She used the outer railing method to slip around to the opposite side of the ship. As she rounded one last deck, she saw that indeed the flywaymen were back, this time with reinforcements.

She counted twelve airdinghies and behind them two larger airships. Nothing to the school's size, but full dirigibles of the kind that were rumored to be in production for overseas transport.

Sophronia scanned the occupants, searching for the shadow gentleman. *He must be there.* It was dark and she had to squint so hard she developed a headache, but she managed to make him out in one of the dirigibles. The silhouette of a man not dressed for riding, like the other flywaymen, but in full evening attire, including a stovepipe hat. Sophronia had no doubt that the band about that top hat was green. He was standing to the back—seeming, as before, to be an observer rather than a participant.

Sophronia wondered if he observed her, in her dressing gown, with an evening bag about her neck, clinging to the side of the ship.

She supposed the dirigibles must belong to sky pirates. Like flywaymen, she had thought them mere creatures of legend. *After all, how does a pirate afford a dirigible?* But there was no other explanation. The two dirigibles floating among the crowd of smaller ships, like mallards among the ducklings, looked as though they matched each other. It was as if the trappings of weaponry and flags were merely that, trappings, and the dirigibles were a stylish set intended for something far more grand than threatening a finishing school. Sophronia concluded that, like the galleons of old, these must have been stolen from the government.

One of the flywaymen put a bullhorn to his mouth. “Give us the prototype!”

The teachers said nothing.

One of the dirigibles fired, a flash of a cannon on the deck, and a large object came hurtling in their direction. It whizzed right by where Sophronia clung, only just missing the school.

Sophronia suppressed a shriek.

“Fire, Professor Braithwope,” she heard Lady Linette order.

Professor Braithwope came into Sophronia’s line of sight as he took two vampire-quick leaps to the front of the deck. He pointed his tiny crossbow at the fleet arrayed before them.

Sophronia doubted a crossbow of such daintiness would be very effective.

He fired.

As one, all the mechanicals, whose little cannons had been pointed at the professor the entire time, swiveled, tracking the arc of the crossbow bolt.

They target the bolt! Sophronia realized. *I hope Professor Braithwope is a good shot.*

He was. The bolt hit and stuck into the side of one of the airdinghies, well below the edge of the carrier basket, out of reach of its occupants.

Lady Linette came into view as she reached over the side railing and pulled at something hidden there.

The soldier mechanicals all fired at once in a tremendous boom of noise.

Sophronia winced and wished she could cover her ears, but she needed both her hands to hang on.

The squeak deck disappeared in a cloud of gunpowder smoke. The sweet, tinny smell floated down to Sophronia. When it cleared, she could see that one of the small airdinghies was listing to one side, two of its balloons collapsing. It started to spiral down and out of the sky. The ones to either side of it had also taken hits.

One of the dirigibles returned fire. This time it aimed higher. The cannonball tore a massive hole in the school’s middle balloon. Sophronia tilted her head back, trying to look into the cavity and assess the damage. But the balloon was one deck over, and it was too dark for her to see anything. One side of the balloon looked to be caving slightly, and the whole ship listed in that direction.

“Get the sooties up there!” she heard Professor Lefoux yell, pointing at the damaged balloon.

Professor Braithwope did his fast scuttle out across the plank to the pilot’s nest, presumably to call down to the boiler room.

Lady Linette stepped forward to the very front railing of the squeak deck. She needed no bullhorn, for she was very good at projecting her voice. *There is no doubt about it; she must have had considerable experience on the stage.*

“Stop firing. We will give you the prototype! Send over your ambassador.”

They are giving up very easily, thought Sophronia. *Seems orchestrated, perhaps to pass along the fake prototype? Use it as a means to buy more time?*

The flywayman with the bullhorn shouted back over the intervening distance, “Agreed.”

THE CORRECT WAY TO GET CAUGHT

"What happened next?" Dimity was positively riveted by Sophronia's tale.

"Professor Lefoux gave the flywaymen a fake prototype. It looked like a shiny metal dodecahedron." It was the following morning, and they ought to be getting ready for breakfast, but instead they were lying in their beds chatting.

"I started to worry when you weren't back after the bells stopped sounding." Dimity's pretty face was somber with reprimand. "You could have *said* something to me about where you were going."

"I didn't want to get you into any kind of trouble. Bumbersnoot is my concern. Also, I hoped to return before anyone noticed. In the end, I had to wait while the teachers cleaned up after the battle. Did you know they brought sooties up top and had them climb inside the balloon to make repairs?" Sophronia was pretty darn certain, from a gangly silhouette, that one of those sooties had been Soap. She did not say this to Dimity. For some reason she felt very private about and possessive of Soap. Also a little embarrassed. She suspected Dimity might scoff. Petunia had always been very mocking whenever Sophronia befriended the stable lads. Then she hadn't minded so much. Now, after weeks of finishing school, she was beginning to concern herself with appearances.

"Regardless, I had to wait while everyone fussed over the balloon. I overheard the teachers talking."

Dimity's eyes widened appreciatively.

"Professor Lefoux said that the flywaymen would be back, because the

prototype they passed over was a fake. She said it would fool them for a while, but that it was no guarantee of safety." Sophronia rolled over and pulled her black velvet reticule out from under the bed. She extracted a few lumps of coal. Bumbersnoot was asleep at the foot of her bed, barely warm. He was conserving all of his energy, his tiny internal steam engine almost completely shut down. She put him on the floor.

Sophronia tapped him on the head with a chunk of coal and then placed it in front of his face. He made a low whirring noise, heated up slightly, and then began to eat. Shortly thereafter, steam emanated from his underbelly, and he got to his four tiny feet with a few squeaks and clunks.

Sophronia continued her story. "Professor Braithwope said something about taking refuge in the mist—going gray, he called it—to buy us extra time."

Dimity looked thoughtful. "No mail drops for a while, then. Monique will be disappointed."

"As indeed am I. I was going to write to Mumsy for more clothes. And we were going to drop your brother that glove."

Dimity urged her on. "What happened next?"

"Sister Mattie asked about Bunson's. Professor Lefoux said something about them doing their best."

"I suppose that means Bunson's is trying to build a replacement prototype," Dimity suggested.

"Or a better-looking fake."

"I suspect we're heading in that direction, anyway," said Dimity.

"Goodness, how can you tell? The moor always looks the same to me."

"Well, the school will need proper repairs. I believe those are always conducted at Bunson's."

"Oh?" Sophronia was excited by this idea. She felt like they had been floating about aimlessly for an aeon.

"Well, the propeller is winding strong this morning." The girls looked up to see Sidheag, arms crossed over her bony chest, wearing a long pink flannel nightgown and slouching against the doorjamb. *Pink!*

"Is that what that vibration means?" Sophronia asked without missing a beat. She ought to have known someone would overhear their conversation. At least it was Sidheag, and not Monique. *Speaking of Monique, she's going to try to send that letter as soon as we arrive at Bunson's.*

“Indeed.”

“How long have you been standing there?” Dimity wanted to know, drawing the covers up over her own red brocade nightgown.

“Long enough,” replied Lady Kingair, coming inside their room. She bent to pat Bumbersnoot, who was working busily on his second lump of coal.

“So you managed to scarper back here without being discovered?” she asked Sophronia.

“Yes.”

“Convinced of that, are ya?”

Sophronia felt a cold chill go up her spine.

“Yes, why?”

“Because Lady Linette is waiting for you in our sitting room, and she does not look pleased. She told me to tell you specifically, Sophronia, to dress and get yourself in there right sharp.”

“Oh, bother,” said Sophronia. “Dimity, will you keep an eye on Bumbersnoot for me?”

“Of course.”

“Bumbersnoot, stay here with Auntie Dimity, please.”

The mechanimal sat back on his haunches and sent a puff of smoke at her, tail wagging back and forth hopefully. Sophronia tossed Dimity another lump of coal, hoping to keep the dog’s attention in their room, and climbed out of bed. In the interest of appearing as innocent as possible, she donned her simplest dress—a blue muslin with white flowers—and Sidheag helped her do up the buttons. Over this Sophronia pulled a white pinafore. She elected simply to plait her hair, as it was fastest. With Lady Linette such things were always a bit dodgy—take time to be particularly presentable, or dress quickly? She popped a lace cap on her head and went reluctantly into their drawing room to see how much trouble she’d gotten herself into.

“Miss Temminnick, good morning.”

“Good morning, my lady.” Sophronia bobbed a curtsy. She’d been working very hard with Dimity on the art of the curtsy—how to bend the knees without sticking out the bottom, a smooth dip and rise. Dimity had even shown her how to lower her eyes and glance up through her lashes.

Lady Linette, who looked rather irked, nevertheless noticed the improvement. “Much better, young lady. Not so much tilt to the head, not

with a lady or a vampire. With another woman, it comes off as coy. With a vampire, it comes off as invitation. Otherwise a very commendable effort."

Sophronia rose from her curtsy. "Thank you, my lady."

"However, it does not make up for some very disturbing news I've recently had."

"Yes, my lady?" Sophronia's stomach fluttered ominously.

"I have been informed that you were seen *out* last night. You were spotted through one of the portholes climbing the exterior hull."

Sophronia narrowed her eyes. *Someone's ratted on me! That's certainly not in the spirit of this school.* "One of the teachers, my lady?"

"Oh, very nice. No defensive tone, merely a query for further information. You are trying to take advantage of my annoyance in the hope that I will be indiscreet about the informant. You are learning well, Miss Temminnick, very well indeed."

Sophronia widened her eyes hopefully, trying to look both nonthreatening and inquiring.

"Simply in honor of such a creditable effort, I will tell you that it was a student. And this is a concern. On the one hand, no one else saw you. On the other, you have made an enemy of one of your fellows in such a way as to cost you a covert operation. You should pay very close attention in your blackmail lessons in order to forestall such behavior in the future. Then again, so should the student in question. She might have used this information to manipulate you, rather than coming directly to us. A questionable choice of application, but perhaps she thought the matter was time sensitive."

"My lady?" Sophronia's heart was in her throat. *Please don't turn me out.*

"Yes, of course. So, for being seen, you are hereby ordered to report to Cook. She will have you cleaning the pots and pans after supper in the mess for the next two weeks."

Sophronia started to let out a breath of relief, but then Lady Linette continued. "For being told upon…" She paused, considering.

I'm being sent home when we get to Bunson's. I know it. Sophronia clenched her hands.

"For being told upon, you are being denied attendance at the upcoming stopover at Swiffle-on-Exe. There is an acting troupe in town. You will

have to miss the show. And for being out during lockdown, you will not be allowed off the ship at all."

Sophronia let out a breath and relaxed her hands. "Thank you, my lady."

"Goodness, girl, what are you thanking me for?"

"You aren't going to expel me."

"Of course not! Don't be silly. None of the *professors* actually saw you, and you avoided the mechanicals during a high-order alarm. That's very good work indeed. And you've displayed untapped skills in climbing and night stealth. I'm considering extra lessons as a result. We were told you had gumption. Our mistake was in underestimating how much. Why were you out and about?"

"Curiosity." Sophronia lied without hesitation.

Lady Linette pursed her lips. "That's as good a reason as any. And now, girl, let us discuss hairstyles. I'm detecting young Lady Kingair's effect on your coiffure. It won't do, won't do at all. She is a lost cause, but she has the rank and title to be eccentric. You may actually need to look like a *lady* upon occasion. From here on out, you are to put your hair up in curling rags every night. Get Miss Pelouse to show you how. I do not wish to see you with a plait ever again. Is that clear?"

Sophronia considered this her real punishment—the very worst of the lot. *Curling rag training from Monique, indeed!* Still, she bobbed another curtsy of acknowledgment. "Very good, my lady."

"Good morning, Miss Temminnick."

"Good morning, my lady."

"Oh, and Miss Temminnick? You do realize you did not have to admit to your little excursion? It was your word against that of your accuser. Keep that in mind, in the future. Denial is always an option." With which Lady Linette swept from the room, her morning dress one of a particularly fluffy lavender, so wide it barely fit through the door.

"It has to be Monique!" said Dimity. She was pacing around their room, her hands and arms flying in annoyance, as though she were fending off a bee. The ruffles on the sleeves of her peach dress had an almost sea creature–like way of drifting about after her. "I wonder if Lady Linette is her *friend* on staff?"

Sophronia was charmed by how offended Dimity was on her behalf. “Of course it’s Monique. And I suppose it could be Lady Linette; she’s an actress, after all.” Sophronia collapsed onto her bed with a groan. “Oh, but *curling rags*!”

“They can’t be that bad.”

“Easy for you to say—you’ll never need them. Why did I have to be cursed with straight hair? And you know, I never cared much before now. What is this place doing to me? I’m coming over all frivolous.”

Dimity had no solution to that particular problem. “I’m sorry you’re going to miss the theatricals.”

“In Swiffle-on-Exe? It could be worse.”

“It *is* worse: all the boys will be attending.”

Sophronia flopped onto her back. She wasn’t certain whether to be upset or pleased by this. “That’s all right, really it is. I don’t think I’m quite ready for boys yet. My eyelash fluttering is subpar.”

“Oh, but that’s what Bunson’s is for! Practice. I overheard Monique telling Preshea all about it. Some of the girls even keep score. They use what we learn to make as many boys as possible fall in love with them. They aren’t allowed to encourage actual declarations, of course. If one of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s girls takes a real beau, he’d better be a baronet at the very least.”

“Isn’t Bunson’s training evil geniuses?”

“Yes, mostly.”

“Well, is that wise? Having a mess of seedling evil geniuses falling in love with you willy-nilly? What if they feel spurned?”

“Ah, but in the interim, think of the lovely gifts they can make you. Monique bragged that one of her boys made her silver and wood hair sticks as anti-supernatural weapons. With amethyst inlay. And another made her an exploding wicker chicken.”

“Goodness, what’s that for?”

Dimity pursed her lips. “Who doesn’t want an exploding wicker chicken?”

Sidheag opened the door and stuck her head in. “Are you two going to wallow in here all day? It’s time to eat, and rumor is there’s going to be a big announcement over the scones.”

“We’re headed to Swiffle-on-Exe. There’s a play on. We’ll be allowed to

attend alongside Bunson's," said Sophronia.

"Gracious, aren't you in the know?" Sidheag arched an eyebrow and turned away. Today her dress was of plaid, as if she were a housekeeper.

Dimity sidled up to Sophronia and said, under her breath, "Plaid! Can you believe it?"

They followed Sidheag out to where the debuts stood waiting.

Dimity, with a mercurial gleam in her eye, said, "Sophronia claims we're headed to Swiffle-on-Exe to see a play with Bunson's."

Instantly the others all began to chatter excitedly.

"Really? What kind of play?" Agatha was, for the first time in Sophronia's experience, animated by the prospect. Agatha, so shy it was almost disruptive, never seemed to get excited about anything.

"Bunson's? You mean *boys*?" Preshea's pretty face narrowed into covetousness. Sophronia thought she looked like a partridge with a plucking disorder.

"Now, Preshea," reprimanded Dimity, "it's no good choosing your first husband from a school for evil geniuses. Much too difficult to kill."

"Why do you know any of this?" Monique demanded of Sophronia.

"Why, Monique, surprised I learned it first?" said Sophronia, minding her recent lesson on not revealing information unnecessarily.

They made their way through the passageways and out onto various decks toward the dining hall. Sophronia grabbed Monique by the arm, holding her back. Dimity gave her a confused look, but took the cue and concentrated on shepherding the other three forward, giving Sophronia some privacy.

"A word, if you would, Monique?"

"What do *you* want?"

"Shoddy business, tittle-tattling on me like that. I thought you didn't do that kind of thing. Did you go to your pet teacher?"

"I have no idea to what you are referring."

"Oh, very nice—denial. Lady L said I ought to have applied it better myself. I'll remember that in future."

"Do you think you might make sense at some point, or are you merely trying to annoy me?"

Actually, thought Sophronia, *she's pretty good.* Monique's blue eyes were guileless, even as they narrowed in exasperation.

“Not that I really wanted to go to the play,” Sophronia added.

Monique shook her off. “You’re mad, did you know that? But what can one expect from a covert recruit? Do refrain from socializing with me henceforth, will you?”

“With pleasure.” Sophronia walked off.

“Well? What did she say?” whispered Dimity.

“She denied everything.”

“Of course she did.”

They arrived and took their seats at table.

The murmuring of talk and consumption of comestibles hushed when the headmistress stood and stepped forward, her hair a wild pouf of red. She took a deep breath and opened her arms wide, bracing her back and pushing her tremendous cleavage forward. “Ladies, ladies, your attention, please! We have changed direction toward that other school, Bunson and Lacroix’s Boys’ Polytechnique. There is a small troupe in residence at the moment, performing a highly instructional play, *An Ideal Bathtub*. We thought you ladies deserved a treat. Now, remember, if there is gossip to be garnered, garner it. If there are new dress styles to be imitated, imitate them. If there are hearts to be broken, break them. That’s my girls.”

“Gossip? I thought she didn’t know about us, you know, gathering information?” Dimity was confused.

“I think she is actually implying social gossip,” said Sophronia.

Mademoiselle Geraldine continued. “We will be on course for Swiffle-on-Exe for the next three days. Regular lessons will proceed smoothly during the interim. Now remember, ladies, this is a privilege, and attendance will be revoked at the professors’ discretion. In one case, it already has been.”

A flutter of *oooh*s swept through the hall, and everyone pretended not to glance in Sophronia’s direction. *The thing about a finishing school that trains intelligencers,* thought Sophronia, *is that everyone knows your business, sometimes before you do. And occasionally they’ll make it up simply for entertainment*. Whether she liked it or not, word was certainly out about her punishment, if not her crime. The speed of dissemination was impressive, if slightly embarrassing.

Everything was a fervor of excitement and preparation for the next three days. Despite what Mademoiselle Geraldine had said, things were not as before. Lessons changed to focus on proper dress and manners for the theater. Lady Linette spent two solid hours on opera glasses alone! Even Captain Niall switched from knives to garrotes. Much easier, he explained, to kill someone with a garrote at a seated event; only make certain you sit *directly* behind your quarry. “Very inconvenient,” he said, “to try to kill someone when you are seated in front of him.”

You’d think we were visiting the queen, thought Sophronia, watching Preshea try on yet another possible dress for *An Ideal Bathtub*.

The girls were assembled in their common parlor on the evening prior to their arrival at Swiffle-on-Exe. It was the only spare time they had, before bed, and they ought to be practicing walking properly in heeled boots. Instead, they were picking through each other’s wardrobes and planning their accessories.

Sophronia was the only one practicing. She was tottering about, pretending she wasn’t interested in outfits, since she wasn’t to attend. She was intrigued to find, however, that Agatha had the most expensive gowns and nicest jewelry, much to Monique’s annoyance. Dimity’s outfit, on the other hand, came in for pitying glances. It wasn’t so much the fabric, although that was bad—purple and teal stripes—as the cut of the dress, which was nowhere near as elegant as current fashions dictated. Sophronia shuddered to think what they might say of her one and only evening gown. She was shocked at herself for such shallowness. *I’m turning out just like my sisters!*

Into the madness of a parlor strewn with dresses, wraps, and gloves, not to mention girls prancing about in assorted fripperies, came a loud knock.

Sidheag, who was standing off to one side observing the chaos with an eye to the ridiculous, went to answer it. Whoever was there was too short to be visible on the other side of Lady Kingair’s lanky form.

A small voice with a French accent queried cheekily, “Is Miss Sophronia mucking about?”

Sidheag looked down for a long moment and then turned around, eyebrows arched, and addressed the room. “Sophronia, you have a, erm, caller.” Then she resumed her languid pose, watching the other girls cavort with the look of a scientist observing the actions of a newly discovered

species.

A few of the others glanced over to see who was at their door, but the visitor garnered very little attention after that first assessment.

Sophronia, still in the heels, teetered over.

“Good evening,” said Vieve, grinning up at her. Vieve, as it turned out, did indeed have green eyes. His hair was pitch-black under his cap and he was looking quite at ease with the world, in the manner of most chronically ill-behaved children. He was dressed respectably, if a bit on the newspaper lad end of the spectrum, and was at least clean.

“Oh, Vieve, how are you?”

“Topping. I’ve come to meet your… you know…”

“Oh, yes, of course. I forgot.” Sophronia turned around to face the other girls. “Would you mind if Vieve came in?”

Dimity said, “Who?”

The others barely looked up.

Vieve took off his cap, clutching it self-consciously to his chest, and sauntered into the room.

“I wouldn’t pair that hat with those gloves, miss, if I were you,” he said, rendering judgment on Preshea’s choice of accessories.

The black-haired girl noticed him. “Oh, you wouldn’t, would you? And what would you know of such matters?”

“I *am* French,” replied Vieve with a shrug.

“Good point, that,” said Dimity, grinning.

“You’re nine years old and your guardian is an intellectual!” protested Preshea.

To be fair to Vieve, Sophronia privately agreed with him about the hat and gloves. The gloves were magenta and the hat pea green. “I wouldn’t get involved if I were you,” she said to the boy.

Vieve followed her through the chaos toward her room.

Dimity called after her, “Remember your reputation, Sophronia. Keep the door open!”

Monique let out a trill of unpleasant laughter. Agatha made her way over to Dimity to whisper something in her ear.

“I’m good with accessories,” protested Vieve to Sophronia once they were safely away from the bedlam.

“I’m certain you are, but there is no point in arguing with Preshea. She

always wins, even when she doesn't. And here is Bumbersnoot. Bumbersnoot, this is Vieve."

The little dog was sitting expectantly at the foot of Sophronia's bed, waiting for lights-out. He'd fled the parlor after Monique kicked him when he ate one of her hair ribbons. He now had a little dent in one side.

Vieve's green eyes lit up with pleasure at seeing the mechanimal. "May I?"

"Of course. Here you are." Sophronia picked up Bumbersnoot and presented him to the young boy.

The lad examined the creature closely, popping open various hatches and spending a good deal of time studying the tiny steam engine inside Bumbersnoot's stomach. "Incredible. Such intricacy. But he needs to be serviced, I think. Has he been squeaking at all?"

"As a matter of fact, he has."

Vieve nodded. "I'll come by tomorrow, when everyone is groundside, with some oil and bits of kit. Give him a spiffing up."

"That's very kind." Sophronia wasn't certain how she felt about a nine-year-old taking apart her pet, but she wasn't about to turn down the offer, either. If Bumbersnoot needed a look-see, Vieve was the closest she had to an expert.

"It'd be a pleasure. He's quite the little beauty, isn't he?"

Bumbersnoot had a long, sausagelike body, and while he was mostly bronze, it was clear he had some brass and iron parts, so that he was rather a patchwork. Fond of him though she was, "little beauty" was not a phrase Sophronia would have used to describe him. "If you say so."

Vieve put Bumbersnoot back on the bed and doffed his hat. "Until tomorrow, then, miss?" Such an odd child.

"Until tomorrow. Shall I show you out?" Sophronia fell back on her recent training in how to dismiss a gentleman caller without rancor.

"I think I can manage on my own." With which the boy left through the parlor, doffing his hat to the girls as he did so.

Dimity appeared in the doorway, glaring at her. "Who on earth is that? Or should I say, who in the *clouds* is that?"

"Vieve."

"So I gathered, but Sophronia, you never told *me* you had befriended Professor Lefoux's eccentric niece!"

“Niece?”

On the Importance of Proper Dress

Vieve was as good as her word. *Her* word. Sophronia still could not quite believe it. It seemed that Professor Lefoux's nine-year-old niece liked to dress as a boy and fraternize with sooties. And that apparently Professor Lefoux let her!

"What-ho, Miss Sophronia," said the girl, standing at the door and clutching a chubby reticule before her.

"Good evening, Miss Genevieve," replied Sophronia formally. "Won't you come in?"

Vieve didn't look at all embarrassed at being found out. "So you know, do you?"

"Why on earth would you want to go about as a *boy*?"

"Boys have it far more jolly." Vieve gave one of her dimpled grins. "I assure you, I find female dress fascinating. I simply prefer not to wear it myself. It's very confining."

Sophronia looked her guest up and down. This evening the girl was wearing her customary cap paired with an oversized man's shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a brown vest, and brown jodhpurs. "You'll forgive me if I don't entirely trust your judgment in matters of appearance."

Vieve laughed.

"There is your patient." Sophronia pointed to Bumbersnoot, who had taken advantage of the absence of Sophronia's fellow denizens to lounge in the parlor under the tea table in a position of prominence he wasn't normally permitted.

Vieve dumped the contents of her reticule onto the top of the tea table. Her kit appeared to be mainly mechanic's tools and a few unlabeled glass bottles with corks. The girl coaxed Bumbersnoot out from under the table, sat down on the settee, and lifted him into her lap.

"Can I do anything to help?"

"Don't think so. I take it you got caught climbing during shutdown and that's why they banned you from attending the play?"

"I didn't get caught; someone saw me and told."

"That's not on!" Vieve tipped the mechanimal upside down, opened up his stomach, and began tinkering and poking about with a sort of long squiggly stick made of iron. She picked up one of her little bottles, uncorked it, and poured a drop of some dark, viscous liquid down the stick so it went directly where she wanted it to. Vieve really was remarkably adept for a nine-year-old.

"So you're Professor Lefoux's niece?"

"That's what she tells me."

Sophronia sat back on the settee and tried to look casual. "Know anything about this *prototype*?"

"Now, miss, why would you think that?"

"You like mechanics and inventions, and so far as I can gather, the prototype is both."

The girl looked up and smiled, looking far more her age than when she was concentrating on Bumbersnoot. "It's for a special communication machine."

"A what?"

"Ever since the telegraph failed, stymied by the aether currents, they've been working on this new idea for communication over long distances—one station to another. Unfortunately, there seems to be some difficulty making them transmit back and forth. The researchers at the Royal Society in London came up with a new prototype to fix this. They made two: one for London, and one to come here, to Bunson's."

"Why Bunson's?"

"Well, that's where the other communication machine is located, of course. Anyway, something happened to that prototype."

"Monique hid it."

Vieve looked impressed. "Really? How do you know that?"

“I was with her at the time. That’s when I was recruited.”

“It was her finishing assignment?”

“Yes. And she failed.”

“That explains why she’s bunking down with debuts. And why she wasn’t allowed to attend the play either.” Vieve’s dimples disappeared and she once more looked unnaturally serious for a nine-year-old.

That little bit of information was news to Sophronia. She’d sent Dimity off with strict instructions to keep a very close eye on Monique. Instructions that Dimity would find very hard to follow. “Monique didn’t go? Why isn’t she here in quarters?”

“Skulking about the teachers’ section, ain’t she? Nasty piece of work, that one. And gets away with it, what’s worse.”

Sophronia pursed her lips. She didn’t have time for Monique’s tomfoolery at the moment. “So do you know where it is?”

“The prototype?”

“No, the communication machine at Bunson’s.” *If I could get a look at it, I might learn why everyone thinks it’s so important. Besides, I’d like to see inside Bunson’s, where girls aren’t supposed to go, on principle.*

Vieve looked up at that, her green eyes narrowed. “I can see why you keep getting into trouble. Are you sure you’re a girl?”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“You don’t act like a girl.” Vieve cocked her head. “You want to go after it?”

Sophronia nodded. “See what all the fuss is about.”

This didn’t appear strange to Vieve. “We’re going to need help. Can’t get on and off this airship that easily.”

“Good thing we’re friendly with the sooties, then, isn’t it?”

Genevieve Lefoux dimpled down at her work. “Good point. Right.” She put Bumbersnoot back on his feet. “That should do it.”

The mechanimal shook himself, like a wet dog might, and trotted about the room. His tail wagged excitedly, *ticktockticktock*!

Sophronia watched him. “He’s moving much easier, and he doesn’t seem to be squeaking. You do good work.”

Vieve blushed. “I try. He might… oh, there he goes.”

Bumbersnoot crouched down in one corner of the parlor and deposited a pile of ash in a small mound.

“Oh, dear. Bad mechanimal!”

Vieve defended the dog. “He *is* a tiny steam engine. There’re bound to be a few deposits.”

“What about his capacity as a storage device?”

Vieve said, “About the size of your fist. Any larger and it might get stuck.”

Sophronia nodded, hoarding the information away for future use. “So are you any good at climbing?”

“Yes, but fortunately, we don’t have to.” The girl held out her wrist. On it she had strapped a wide leather band with what looked like a small brass jewelry case affixed to it. She flipped open the lid and held up the gadget for Sophronia to see.

At first Sophronia thought it might be a music box, but when she looked closer, she saw there were all sorts of dials and wheels and small knobs.

“What is it?”

Vieve grinned. “I call it my anti-mechanical mobility and magnetic disruption emission switch. Soap calls it *the obstructor*.”

It took only five minutes for Sophronia to badly want an obstructor of her own.

Vieve simply marched out into the hallway, and when a maid came trundling threateningly in their direction, the girl pointed her wrist at the mechanical and clicked a switch with her free hand.

The maid froze in place. Steam stopped emanating from the base of its carapace, and the gears and dials where its face ought to be stopped moving. It was as though the mechanical had seen something scandalous and been seized by a fainting fit. *Ingenious!*

“Come on!” Vieve grabbed Sophronia by the hand and dragged her past the mechanical. “The effect wears off in six seconds. I’m trying to figure out how to extend it, but that’s the best we’ve got at the moment.”

They ran past the maid, pausing at a bend in the hallway and peeking around the corner in case there was another mechanical, or possibly one of the students who was being punished by confinement and had similar escapist tendencies.

So they proceeded through the sections and levels of the airship,

engaging in a kind of transdirigible hopscotch. Anytime they happened upon a mechanical, Vieve froze the poor thing for six seconds while they dashed past and continued on.

They crossed the midpoint of the school and immediately headed down toward the lower levels. As Vieve explained, “There are still two teachers aboard.”

“Professor Braithwope?” Sophronia said, hazarding a guess. “He can’t leave the ship. And”—she paused to think—“your aunt?”

“Because she doesn’t care for anything fun or entertaining,” explained Vieve without rancor.

Eventually, they found themselves at the entrance to the boiler room. Sophronia felt odd approaching that room from above rather than below. They pushed aside two massive brass doors emblazoned with images of fire and all sorts of symbols of danger. Sophronia squinted. One of the symbols looked to be a badger with his tail in flames. Another was a skull like that on a pirate’s flag, but with its mouth open and long vampire fangs. *If that’s a vampire, perhaps the badger on fire is meant to be a werewolf?* Another, Sophronia could swear, was a robin in a bowler. *What*, she wondered, *is dangerous about a robin in a bowler?*

They climbed down a small flight of stairs out onto an internal balcony that overlooked the engine chamber. It was like being in a box at the theater. From that vantage, Sophronia and Vieve could see the entirety of the boiler room spread out below them: the four huge boilers with orange mouths agape, the mountain of coal over to one side, and smaller piles near the boilers. There were giant pumps and pistons, and rotary gears and belts, some cycling round, others moving up and down, and some utterly still. Lit by the flickering of the boilers, the colossal machinery glowed. Even all the coal dust and steam in the air had not dulled the shine. Sophronia wondered if they polished the metal regularly. Threading through and around and within the machines were the sooties, like ants. The larger forms of the greasers, mechanics, and firemen stood as points of stillness within this movement; fulcrums to which the sooties would periodically gather for instructions, as if those selfsame ants had discovered a nice crumb of cheese.

“Impressive, from this angle,” said Sophronia.

“Beautiful.” Vieve’s eyes gleamed. “Someday I want a whole massive

laboratory exactly like this all to myself."

"Oh?"

"I shall name it my contrivance chamber." She had clearly given this a great deal of thought.

"Excellent name. Perhaps we should move on before we're noticed by an engineer?"

"Well put." Vieve led Sophronia over to a set of steep stairs that spiraled to the boiler room floor. Vieve scuttled down. Sophronia, who was in a dark blue visiting dress with multiple petticoats, followed as nimbly as those petticoats would allow.

Vieve knew the way once they got down. She moved with purpose through the machines and around the coal heaps, in easy avoidance of greasers, sliding in and out of the sooties as if she were one. With her cap pulled low and her hands shoved deep into the pockets of her jodhpurs, she looked like a sootie, only shrunken and a little less dirty.

Sophronia, on the other hand, felt self-conscious. She stuck out like a puff pastry among meat pies in her prim dress. She was glad that when they stopped it was behind a massive rotary engine to one side of the room, mostly out of sight.

Vieve grabbed an impish towheaded boy by one elbow. "Rafe, fetch Soap, would ya?"

"Do it yourself, Trouble."

"Can't. I got important *company*. Couldn't leave a lady alone in this dangerous place, now could I?"

"Her?" The blond boy squinted into the shadows where Sophronia stood. "What's one of *them* doing down 'ere?"

"Same as everybody else: minding her own business. Now get Soap, would ya?"

The blond sniffed, but ambled off.

"Pleasant young man," commented Sophronia.

"They can't all be as charming as me," Vieve replied with a smile.

"Or as adorable as me," added Soap, coming up behind Vieve and nicking her cap. "Good evening, Miss Temminnick; Vieve. To what do we owe this honor? Shouldn't you be watching a play or something highfalutin in town?"

"Give it back!" Vieve made a grab for her hat, but Soap held it out of

reach. “Can’t stand the theater.”

“And I’m not allowed,” Sophronia added. “But Soap, Vieve and I were wondering if you could help us get out?”

“Out?”

“We want to pay a visit to Bunson’s.”

“But why? No one will be there.”

“Exactly,” crowed Vieve.

“They’ve got something we want to see.”

Soap was suspicious. “What *kind* of something?”

“A communication machine,” Sophronia explained.

Vieve nodded, grinning.

Soap looked back and forth between them. He ended with Sophronia. “Not you as well? Gone barmy over mechanics, have you? I should never have introduced you two. It’ll all end in tears and oil.”

“Not really. I’m more intrigued by this one’s desirability.”

“What?”

“Flywaymen want it, or parts of it. Monique failed because of it. I’ve seen two air battles so far over stray bits of it.”

Soap latched on to the last part of her statement. “You saw what happened with the mid-balloon?”

“Yes, and I saw you repairing it.”

“No joke. I was squeaking for nigh on an hour because of all that helium. Funniest thing, repairs up top. So?”

“Someone fired a cannon at us.”

“Because of this communication machine?”

“Not exactly. Because of a piece that might make the communication machines actually communicate with each other.”

Soap looked confused but willing to play along. “Well, very good, then, but I better come with you. Can’t have you two scrabbling about groundside unsupervised.”

Sophronia arched her eyebrows. “I assure you, I have been sneaking around with impunity for years.”

Soap glowered at her.

“Oh, very well,” said Sophronia, unwilling to waste any more time.

Soap enlisted a few off-duty sooties so that a small, dirty herd escorted Sophronia and Vieve over to yet another hatch in the boiler room floor. This

was one Sophronia hadn’t noticed before, in a corner behind what she assumed was a hot water pump for the school’s serpentine room-heating system. Up top, in the residential rooms, the heating contraptions looked like grates in the walls, and they kicked in at night if it got icy, which it often did up high. The one in Dimity and Sophronia’s room made such a rumbling and growling that Dimity named it “Boris the Indigestive.” This, then, was Boris’s origin.

There was a coiled rope ladder resting nearby. When the hatch flipped open, it became clear the airship was floating very low to the ground, perhaps only two stories up. They were also at the edge of the moor. Swiffle-on-Exe became visible after they let down the ladder and began to climb.

The school had stopped above a knoll off a goat path above the town, but it was far enough outside the village for Sophronia to be nervous that, should the moor mists rise up, they would not be able to find their way back. The moon was full, which explained both the revels in the town and the absence of Captain Niall. He would be a true monster tonight, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Sidheag had explained that Captain Niall took himself off several days before the moon, far into the moor, away from civilization, so that his moon-mad werewolf self wouldn’t be a danger to anyone. Sophronia thought this sad. Werewolves supposedly loved the theater.

They dropped down to the grass, Sophronia first, then Vieve, and then Soap. Soap saluted the sooties above and the ladder was pulled up. They would lower it again in exactly two hours, right before the performance was supposed to let out. Sophronia worried about the time constraint, but Vieve was confident that two hours was enough.

Under the bright moon, the path into town was well-lit. Swiffle-on-Exe was a silvery hodgepodge of thatched roofs, church steeples, and the looming monstrosity of Bunson’s to the left. They moved at a swift trot and arrived at the gates to the boys’ school in a little under a quarter of an hour.

Sophronia hid while Soap pulled the porter’s bell rope. They had decided to let Vieve face the porter mechanical initially, both because she had the obstructor and to ascertain whether the porter would recognize her as a female. Vieve maintained that the identifier nodule apixiter, whatever *that* was, had to be the shape of the lower half of a human body and that if

Sophronia would only don trousers like a sensible person…

Either Vieve was correct or some other aspect of her personality came off as intrinsically masculine, for when the gate was thrown open and the mechanical stood facing her, he made no objection.

Vieve stepped toward him and puffed up her chest. “Message for Mr. Algonquin Shrimpdittle from Professor Lefoux,” she said in her high treble voice.

“Give to me, young sir,” boomed back the porter from behind his faceless confusion of gears and cogs.

“Can’t be done,” replied Vieve. “Orders are to deliver it directly.”

The porter let out a blast of steam in apparent annoyance. This flapped up the cravat pinned about his neck so that it momentarily obscured his clockwork face. He whirred and clunked, sending out a puff of smoke from a stack at the top of his head. Finally he said, “Very good, sir, follow me.”

The porter made a wide loop on its tracks. It hadn’t the pivot mechanism and nimbleness of the single-track mechanicals on board the finishing school. It began to trundle away, the wheelbarrow on its backside rattling side to side.

Vieve turned to Sophronia and whispered, “Go on! Hop in!”

“What, inside?”

“It hasn’t any sensory nodules on its back.”

Sophronia gave the young girl a look of doubt. *Then again, Vieve was correct about the porter not recognizing that she was a girl.* She exchanged a look with Soap.

The tall boy flapped his hands slightly in the universal gesture of “you decide.”

Sophronia shrugged, jogged after the porter, and, with a flutter of skirts, hoisted herself inside the wheelbarrow. Soap sprinted after and jumped nimbly in next to her. He sidled in close, bumping up against her shoulder, and grinned. He smelled of soot. Sophronia thought it rather a pleasant odor, on him, and smiled back. Genevieve Lefoux was correct—the porter didn’t register their presence.

Vieve walked alongside the mechanical, as though they were companions out for a stroll. It was rather comical, given that the porter was easily twice the young girl’s height and three times her girth.

The mechanical’s tracks ended at the front of the school’s main building.

This was far more the kind of structure Sophronia had expected from Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. Bunson's had an impressive staircase leading up to huge double doors of wood and iron, engraved with an intricate pattern. Sophronia crouched low in the wheelbarrow as the porter mechanical approached the steps. *How will he alert the interior as to the presence of a messenger?*

The porter touched up against the bottom step where his tracks stopped. This triggered a response. A tremendous amount of steam emanated from below the lowest step, and with a great creaking and groaning, the stairs closed in upon themselves. The whole front section of the building that housed the main doors compressed downward like a concertina. After only a few moments, the doors were at ground level and the stairs had flattened out in such a way that it allowed the porter's tracks to continue.

The porter proceeded toward the doors sedately and bumped autocratically against them with a clang. This was obviously a signal, for one of the doors opened, revealing a darkened corridor. The porter backed off of the collapsed stairs far enough to switch tracks, beginning another loop that would lead him away to commence a circuit of the grounds. As he did this, Sophronia jumped out. She dashed inside, flattening herself instantly on the back side of the unopened half of the door. *One never knows who might be watching.*

Soap and Vieve followed sedately after.

As she passed through the doors, Sophronia noted that the intricate pattern carved into them was that of multiple octopuses holding one another's tentacles in a long unending chain.

It was a good thing she'd chosen stealth, for on the other side of that door a new set of tracks started up, and waiting patiently was yet another faceless mechanical, this one smaller, wearing a white ruffled pinafore, and carrying a duster in its articulated forceps. It was different, more chunky-looking, than the maid mechanicals at Mademoiselle Geraldine's. This maid said nothing and did not react to Sophronia. Sophronia hoped that meant the creature could not make her out in the shadows.

Close on her heels, Vieve and Soap crowded in, intent upon coming to her rescue, if necessary, or her disguise, if not. They saw her hiding and confronted the mechanical maid, both talking at once and gesticulating wildly.

Sophronia hoped that this would confuse the sensory nodules Vieve had referred to earlier and took it as permission to inch past the maid and run down the hallway. Soap and Vieve followed.

They paused for a breather on a small staircase to one side of the hall.

Behind them, the front foyer of the building raised itself back up, filling with white steam as it did so.

“You should have worn trousers,” said Vieve in a low but disgusted voice.

“I may not be a lady yet, by any account,” said Sophronia with great dignity, she felt, “but I am not a boy, either!” She was finding herself far more concerned with attire now than before attending Mademoiselle Geraldine’s.

Soap looked at her. “You look like a lady to me.”

“Thank you, Soap.” *Thank goodness it is dark enough for him not to see me blushing!*

“Of course, miss.”

They continued down the next corridor.

There seemed to be fewer maids at Bunson’s, or perhaps they were decommissioned while the students were out. Sophronia would have predicted that a school full of boys would require more maids, not fewer! Everything was going swimmingly, with Vieve leading them unerringly ever upward through the building.

“You’ve been here before?” whispered Sophronia.

“Many times. Auntie always has some matter to discuss with Mr. Shrimpdittle. Lady Linette won’t let her leave me unsupervised on board. She used to try to get Mademoiselle Geraldine to mind me, but I’d always escape her.”

“So you’ve *seen* the communication machine?”

“Not as yet. They leave me outside. ‘Workshop’s no place for a child.’” Vieve’s voice was full of outrage as she repeated a phase she had clearly heard overmuch in her nine years. “But I know where it’s kept. On the roof.”

Both Soap and Sophronia paused, raising their voices in shock. “The roof?”

“Shush! We don’t know who might *not* have attended the theater. They wouldn’t leave the school with only mechanicals on duty.” Vieve took a

moment to roll up the long sleeves of her shirt, her exposed wrists small and bony.

Sophronia said, “But why stash a piece of delicate equipment on the roof?”

“Search me. Intriguing, isn’t it?” Vieve dimpled at them in a way that made her look very young indeed.

We are being led into enemy territory by a child, thought Sophronia all of a sudden. *This is madness. Oh, well.*

At that moment, a door ahead of them opened out into the darkened hall. Bright unflickering light of the kind that could only come from high-quality gas spilled forth. Into the beam trod a dark blob of a boy—not a mechanical.

The boy was relatively stocky and, like Vieve, shrouded in clothing too big for him. He was bent over a large, antiquated book and humming to himself.

Sophronia, Soap, and Vieve froze in horror.

The boy looked up, caught sight of them lurking in the shadowed hallway, let out a shriek of surprise, and dropped his book. The door slammed closed behind him and all was once more dark.

Proper Communication in Social Situations

"Who's that?" came a querulous voice into the darkness. "I know you're there; show yourselves!"

Sophronia stepped forward. "Buck up, Pillover. It's only me."

Pillover squinted. "Miss Sophronia? What are you doing here? How'd you get in? Is that my sister with you?"

Sophronia dragged a reluctant Vieve and Soap forward. "No, but I do have company. Pillover, may I introduce Genevieve Lefoux and Phineas B. Crow? Vieve, Soap, this is Pillover Plumleigh-Teignmott, Miss Dimity's brother."

Pillover gave his two new acquaintances a very haughty look. "Riffraff?"

"Only on the surface. They're both good eggs. Vieve here is an intellectual, and Soap's, erm"—she paused, struggling—"an engineer of a kind," she managed to come up with.

Soap gave a little snort, but Vieve looked childishly delighted to be described as academic in any way.

Pillover looked Vieve over and seemed to accept her title readily enough for all that she was nine. Then he turned to look up at Soap, illuminated by a bit of moonlight. "But Miss Sophronia, he's colored!"

Sophronia tilted her head and contemplated Soap as though she had never noticed his skin tone before. "It's irrelevant. Or do I mean

irreverent?”

“It is?” Pillover arched one brow.

Sophronia nodded firmly. “Yes.”

Pillover bent and picked up his book. “If you say so.”

“Pillover, what are you doing here, instead of at the theater?”

The boy shrugged. “I’m tired of dealing with Pistons. Oily pains, the lot of them.”

“Pistons?” *He can’t possibly mean roving bits of steam engines, can he?*

Soap sidled in. “Miss Sophronia, we don’t have much time.”

“Oh, of course. Want to come, Pillover? We’re going to the roof to look at a transmitter.”

“Rather!” Pillover’s normally dour face brightened at the idea.

So the infiltration party increased to four, and they trotted onward.

“Is he going to be useful?” Soap asked Sophronia.

“You never know,” replied Sophronia wisely. She turned to their new companion. “So, these Pistons?”

“Oh, they think they are something quite exclusive, skulking about in riding boots, and wearing black shirtwaists, and being all gloomy about the state of the Empire. They sew cogs on the breasts of their jackets in a non-useful manner. Really it’s only an excuse to push everyone else around. And no one does anything about them, because half of them are supposedly the sons of Picklemen. I think it’s all faked, but they’ve got most of the school stitched up. You’d think we were here to learn, but apparently not.”

Sophronia was awed by Pillover’s chatter. “Oh, I know what you mean. We’ve got Monique de Pelouse living with us.”

Pillover wrinkled his nose. “Must be quite the lark.”

“Indeed. She’s already tattled me out.”

“No?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And how’s my pestilence of a sister settling?”

“Better than I. Although she fainted again.”

“Blood?”

“Blood.”

“From what I hear of your school, that’s to be expected.”

“We had lessons in knife-fighting from a werewolf.”

“Werewolf? Bully! We don’t have any supernaturals here. It’s quite a

dearth in the deanship if you ask me. Any reputable school ought to have at least one vampire professor. Eton has three. You lot are only girls, and you've a vampire *and* a werewolf. Jolly unfair, that's what I call it."

By this time they had climbed up several flights of stairs, getting ever closer to the roof, when they came face-to-face with a maid mechanical. Instantly, Vieve and Soap stepped in front of Sophronia and began bouncing about.

"What are you doing?" Pillover demanded.

"Keeping it from deducing that I'm a girl," explained Sophronia.

"Oh, of course, I forgot." After a hesitation, Pillover too began an awkward gyration. They all looked so ridiculous that Sophronia had to suppress a giggle. She managed to slip past the distracted maid and thought about reminding Vieve of her obstructor, but it was so much fun watching them dance she decided not to.

They climbed the last set of stairs up into one of the many turrets, only to be faced with a locked door. Sophronia rattled the handle hopefully. Nothing.

She looked around. "Anyone know how to pick a lock?"

"Some intelligencer you are," complained Pillover.

"I've only been there a month! I can curtsy now, and my eyelash fluttering is practically unparalleled."

"Well, why not flutter your way into the locked room, then?"

Sophronia ignored this and looked at Vieve hopefully. "Inventions?"

Vieve shook her head.

"Stand aside, ladies," said Soap gallantly. "I shall rescue you."

Pillover gave Soap a disgusted look at being included with the "ladies," but made room for him to approach the door.

The tall sootie pulled a tiny leather pouch from some mysterious inside pocket and unrolled it to reveal a set of variously sized metal rods. He examined the lock closely and then selected one of the rods. He stuck this into the keyhole, and after a good deal of fiddling, there came a click.

Before they could push inside, Pillover said, "Careful! It might be booby-trapped."

Everyone stopped and looked at him.

"Evil genius training school, remember? I'd booby-trap it, if I were them, and I'm only *discourteous genius* level."

Sophronia stepped forward. “This was my idea. I’ll do it.”

Acting on instinct—they had yet to cover contravention of houses, house parties, and seating arrangements—Sophronia opened the door a tiny fraction and ran her finger slowly down the crack. A handbreadth up from the ground, she encountered a taut piece of twine. She twisted her fingers around the door, following the string, feeling along the jamb for a tie point. She found it with some relief, as the trap would be impossible to thwart without knowing which end activated it.

She pulled out her sewing scissors, and keeping the twine taut with one hand, cut it with the other. *Is it activated by additional tension from the door opening, or a release in tension when the string snaps?* she wondered. She put her sewing scissors back in her pinafore and pulled out a hair ribbon. She had to give her teachers credit: they were right to insist all students carry scissors, handkerchiefs, perfume, and hair ribbons at all times. At some point she’d learn why they also required a red lace doily and a lemon.

She tied the hair ribbon carefully to the end of the twine and then, keeping the tension as steady as possible, pushed open the door, belaying the hair ribbon at the same time.

The boys and Vieve watched all of this in impressed silence.

Finally, Pillover said, “You *are* getting a good education!”

I suppose I am. By that time Sophronia was all the way inside the room, hand extended, twine and ribbon stretching toward a crouched toadlike device to the right, slightly behind the door.

Vieve bustled over to it. “Compressed tension vent with boiled beet projectiles. Ingenious! Not dangerous, but it would cause quite the mess and definitely identify any intruders. Just a moment; let me disarm the catapults.”

The young girl made a few adjustments. There was a sad squelching noise, and the pull against Sophronia’s hair ribbon relaxed. She untied it from the twine and put it back into her pinafore. *This is fun!*

The room in which they found themselves was built of gray stone and was bare of all furniture, even chairs. There were only the trap and a series of telescopes and other devices set to look up at the skies. These were spaced out, with one to each of the many slotted windows, none of which had glass. The place felt very old, as if they had stepped into some fairy

tale. *Rapunzel, perhaps?* If Rapunzel were a particular fan of astral observation.

One of the windows was bare of devices, and outside it, someone had built an unstable-looking balcony.

"There we are," said Vieve proudly.

They all went over to the window and looked.

"Rickety," pronounced Pillover.

Sophronia pointed to a lever and pulley system on one side. "I think it raises and lowers, like a dumbwaiter. Follow me." She climbed out onto the platform.

"This is not a good idea," Pillover said, following her.

Soap only grinned and bounced after. Vieve came last and immediately went over to examine the pulleys.

"Looks sound to me," she pronounced.

Well, Vieve hasn't led us astray so far, thought Sophronia. "Shall we?"

Vieve turned a little crank. Nothing happened.

"You aren't strong enough," accused Soap.

Vieve looked frustrated and not a little offended. "Actually, I don't have enough mass. Being young is *so* terribly inconvenient!"

"On the bright side, you're only nominally young," consoled Sophronia. "You don't act your age at all."

Vieve blushed crimson in delight. "Oh, why, thank you very much!"

Soap went over to help her man the lever. He looked gangly, but with all the coal he had to move every day, Sophronia suspected him of being quite strong. So he proved.

The contraption raised them up to the roof, where they disembarked to finally face the infamous communication machine. It looked like a deformed cross between a potting shed and a portmanteau.

"That's it?"

"I guess so."

"It looks like two privies," objected Soap.

Sophronia elbowed him. "Don't be crass."

"Well, it *does*!"

They made their way over to the structure. It looked, if possible, even more odd up close, perched in embarrassed shabbiness atop the turret, which was all ancient stone and crenellated edges. They opened the door.

The shed was divided into two human-sized compartments, each filled to bursting with a peculiar assortment of tangled machinery. There were tubes and dials, and what looked to be glass boxes filled with black sand, and here and there blank cradles in obvious want of further enhancements.

Vieve immediately dropped down and crawled in, squirming her small form under various compartments to examine the undersides and any attachment points.

Pillover looked around in a lackluster manner, poked at a few things, and then mooched away. Sophronia and Soap were more entertained by watching Vieve's antics than by the communication machine itself, which was utterly incomprehensible to both of them.

"Well, I'm glad we came all this way for this," said Soap eventually.

"I did think it might give us some kind of indication as to the nature of the prototype, and thus where Monique might have stashed it." Sophronia's tone was apologetic. It seemed like a wasted trip.

Vieve reemerged at that juncture, very animated. "This is amazing! This isn't like that benighted telegraph invention. I don't think it requires any kind of long-distance wiring!"

"Then how could it possibly communicate from point to point?" Sophronia's forehead crinkled.

"It looks like there might be an *aether* conductor in there!" Vieve came over, wiping her small hands on her jodhpurs, leaving greasy black streaks.

Sophronia frowned, wishing she'd read more on the atmospheres. "Do you think they might be trying to bounce directed messages through the aethersphere?"

"It would explain why it has to be on the roof—closer to the aether." Vieve dimpled at her.

"And why they would involve our school. If necessary, we could lift the whole thing right up inside the aether," added Sophronia.

Vieve's eyes glowed. "Can you imagine, point-to-point messaging, long distances? It would revolutionize the whole world."

Soap and Sophronia exchanged looks. Sophronia was thinking about the fact that she'd had no letters from her family on board, nor had she been able to write any. Theoretically, the students should have been asked for letters before arriving in Swiffle-on-Exe. But nothing had been said on the subject, and Sophronia was pretty certain her punishment, like Monique's,

probably extended to communication off-ship. She wondered if Pillover had received anything since she saw him last. *I suppose it's possible parents simply ship us away and then forget about us.*

Soap was probably thinking about the nefarious applications for a communication device. Vieve, a true scientist, saw only the upside of any contraption. Sophronia could imagine why flywaymen might want access.

Sophronia said, "So we are thinking that the missing prototype must be a valve that somehow facilitates… bouncing?"

Vieve nodded. "Which explains the dodecahedron shape you said you saw. Multifaceted for multiple directions and to sympathize with the aetheric humors, which we have always hypothesized are trapezoidal."

Sophronia looked at Soap and Pillover. "You understand any of that?"

Soap shook his head.

Pillover shrugged.

Sophronia said, "Well, I understand I can clean that glove of mine now."

"Come again?" Pillover looked at her in confusion.

"Long story, you were in it, and it was all for naught."

"Sounds exciting."

"Only if you're interested in the postal services."

Pillover looked as though he might be, but Sophronia was starting to worry about the time.

Vieve was practically vibrating. "This is so exciting!"

"Yes, well, that said, we had better return to the airship, now that we have a bit of a better idea what's going on."

"Yes, I think we better had," Soap agreed. He was looking at the position of the moon, clearly concerned.

They made their way safely back through Bunson's—well, mostly.

About halfway down, they rounded a corner and ran smack-dab into a maid mechanical. Literally. Sophronia hit up against her with an *oof* and stumbled backward, banging into Pillover and stepping on Soap's foot. This did not give them enough time to do the little dance of obscurity, nor for Vieve to use her obstructor. The maid identified Sophronia as female and instantly sounded the alarm—a high-pitched whistle. This, in turn, triggered a schoolwide alert.

Unlike the bells of Mademoiselle Geraldine's, Bunson's alarm seemed to be based on the noise made by a wobbling saw, only louder. It was an

amusing *wob-woob* that vibrated through the entire hodgepodge building. The hallways were instantly filled with mechanicals, and one or two humans as well. Sophronia leapt for a nearby door, opened it, and dove inside. The other three crowded after, only to find they had trapped themselves in a broom closet with no possible avenue of escape.

“Simply marvelous. What do we do now?” wondered Pillover.

“Quiet,” said Sophronia.

He ignored her, continuing gloomily, “We’re damned. I’ll be turned away, having achieved only *discourteous*. What will Father say? No Plumleigh-Teignmott has ever been lower than *spiteful genius*. The family honor is at stake.”

“What’re you still larking with us for?” Soap wanted to know. “You’re allowed to roam free, remember?”

“Oh, good point.” Pillover straightened out of his slouch and made to leave the closet.

Sophronia grabbed his arm. “You can’t leave now! You’ll give away our hiding place.”

“It’s only a matter of time.” Pillover was unsympathetic. “They’ll do a schoolwide sweep.” Then he pointed to a nearby broom sharing the closet with them. “Sweep. Ha.”

“Delightful. Now we’re trapped in a closet with puns.” Sophronia gave him a dirty look. “Wait, of course—you are *meant* to be here. Perfect! Everyone turn away from me for a moment.”

The three others looked at her in confusion.

“Simply do as I ask, please?”

Despite being crowded into the closet, the other three all managed to turn their backs on her.

Sophronia shimmied out of one of her two petticoats. “All decent.”

They turned back around.

She handed the undergarment to Pillover.

“Ugh. What’s this for?”

“If you put it on and go out there, they will think it was all a false alarm.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Oh, come on, Pill, please?” Sophronia tried batting her eyelashes.

Pillover appeared to be immune to eyelashes. “The indignity of it!”

“We could come up with a reasonable explanation for your wearing it. Would that help?” wheedled Sophronia.

“Justification for my trotting around wearing lady’s undergarments? I hardly see how.”

Soap’s eyes were sparkling with amusement, and Vieve was dimpling openly at the very idea of Pillover in a skirt. Pillover stood holding the petticoat between thumb and forefinger as if it were contaminated with some dreaded chemical.

“Go on, pull it on over your clothes and go out there,” Sophronia urged.

“You could say you were running some experiment dangerous to your nether regions,” suggested Vieve.

“You could say you were testing the response time of the maid mechanicals,” suggested Sophronia.

“You could say you like lady’s undergarments,” suggested Soap.

“I’m doomed.” Pillover rolled his eyes and flapped the petticoat.

“Oh, go on, Pill,” Sophronia pushed.

Pillover, grumbling, pulled the petticoat on and all the way up to his armpits, as it was far too long for him. Sophronia handed him her hair ribbon to use as a belt. Soap was clearly holding in laughter. Pillover took a deep breath and straightened upright with great dignity and aplomb.

Sophronia listened at the door, hand up to keep the others quiet. Then, when there seemed to be a lull in the activities outside in the corridor, quick as she could, she opened the door, dragged Pillover forward, and thrust him out, slamming the door closed behind him.

The rumbling in the hallway escalated for a minute and then quieted. Into the silence a deep voice boomed out, “Pillover Thaddeus Plumleigh-Teignmott, what *are* you wearing?”

They heard Pillover reply querulously, “A petticoat, Headmaster.”

“So I see. You had better have an excellently malevolent explanation as to why.”

“Well, you see, sir,” Pillover started to say, then, “Ouch. Please, sir, not the ear.”

“Come with me!”

“Yes, sir.”

A clatter of mechanicals on rails and the thud of footsteps followed, leaving the hallway in silence.

“What do you know?” whispered Soap at long last. “He *was* useful.”

After that, they managed to escape Bunson and Lacroix’s Boys’ Polytechnique without further incident. Running up the goat path, Sophronia turned back to look at it only once. She thought that the school looked like an ill-decorated, oversized mangle of chess pieces.

“Our academy is much nicer,” she asserted between breaths as they jogged along. The moor mists had not arisen, and the great caterpillar of multiple dirigibles pressed together that was Mademoiselle Geraldine’s floated gamely before them, lit by a picturesque golden moon.

“You believe so?” Vieve tilted her head in the manner of one who rarely considered the aesthetics of buildings. “Well, ours floats.”

“I mean, it’s less cobbled together.”

Vieve said, “I always thought it had a rather hatlike aspect—like a great floating turban.”

Sophronia tilted her head, but did not quite see it.

They raced on.

Sophronia was worried. “Do you think we made our window?”

Soap nodded. “Yes, but there might be another problem.” He pointed over at a distant hill on their right. There, under the light of the moon, was the shadowy form of a wolf. Wearing a top hat.

“Is that who I think it is?” Sophronia hoped despite herself that it might be some kind of very large dog.

“Know of any other wolves roaming the moors in evening dress?”

“He’s not supposed to be near civilization at the full moon!” Vieve objected.

“Guess someone made a mistake somewhere,” said Soap.

“This is *not good*,” Sophronia said, stating the obvious. The wolf’s muzzle was up and he was scenting the air. Almost as she spoke, his shaggy head turned in their direction.

“We’re closer to the school than he is,” Soap pointed out.

“Yes, but he’s supernatural,” said Vieve, who clearly had some experience in the matter of werewolves. Her little face, normally open and friendly, was pale with fear.

Sophronia took the lead. “Enough talk, everybody—*run*!” Hiking up her skirts, she suited her actions to her words, feeling no shame over the fact that she was down one petticoat and showing ankle to all the world.

Soap quickly outpaced her. His legs were longer, and he was unencumbered by skirts. When he reached the underside of the forward section, he began frantically hopping about and gesticulating wildly. Only then did Sophronia realize that the rope ladder from the boiler room had yet to be dropped down.

She and Vieve came panting up. “Are we too early?”

“Possibly.”

Sophronia picked up a clod of dirt and threw it at the underside of the hull, close to where she thought the hatch might be. She missed completely; the ship was higher up than she thought. Soap and Vieve followed her lead. Vieve also missed, but Soap’s clod hit and spattered against the hatch.

Nothing happened. The werewolf had nearly reached their hill.

At the last possible moment, the hatch popped open and the rope ladder dropped.

“Soap, you go first; you’re fastest.”

“But Miss Sophronia, you’re a lady. Ladies always go first!”

Sophronia threw her shoulders back and looked him in the eye. “I am trained for this.” She wasn’t yet, but it was worth the lie. “Don’t contest a direct order during an active intelligencer undertaking!”

Soap frowned, but he clearly hated to argue with a lady. Least of all Sophronia. He began climbing up.

“Vieve, you next.”

“But—”

“Now!”

Vieve began climbing.

Sophronia started up last, and just as she did so, she snuck one last look at the werewolf.

With a vicious growl, he was upon her.

For the second time that night, Sophronia was grateful to have worn proper dress. Captain Niall dove for her in a tremendous leap of the kind described in countless gothic novels. His jaws were open, his mouth an angry cavern of teeth and dripping saliva, and when he struck he bit down hard, ruthlessly savaging her… other petticoat.

Sophronia screamed and kicked out.

The werewolf’s teeth were stuck in the bottom reinforced hem. This was her strongest-starched underskirt, the kind designed to support a gown in a

full and feminine pouf.

Sophronia kicked again and her foot struck the beast's sensitive nose.

Captain Niall shook his huge, shaggy head, partly in pain and partly to get loose from the petticoat. His top hat wiggled back and forth hypnotically. The combined weight and motion dragged the undergarment off Sophronia. Both the werewolf and the petticoat fell to the ground. Sophronia, remembering that amazingly high leap the captain had performed in order to get them up on board the ship originally, began climbing as fast as she possibly could.

Sophronia's under-petticoat was of good-quality horsehair, thick and very durable. It should be; it was a hand-me-down that had survived three sisters before her.

But the werewolf, with supernatural strength, tore through the thick fabric as if it were fine muslin. Captain Niall wrestled with the garment briefly before shaking himself loose from the tatters. He crouched down and leapt for Sophronia again.

Sophronia angled her bottom around and swung the rope ladder to one side, avoiding the werewolf by the narrowest of margins.

"Captain Niall," she said between pants, "I liked you very much better when you weren't trying to kill me!"

The werewolf landed, shook his head, and whined as from the hatch above someone pelted him with a handful of coal. One particularly large lump hit his already-abused nose.

He tilted his head back and howled.

Sophronia attained the safety of the hatch. Multiple soot-covered hands reached for her and dragged her inside. Meanwhile, Soap threw another handful of coal down at the werewolf. Next to him, a few of the larger sooties stood grimly clutching steel stoking poles, ready to fend off the beast if necessary.

There was no need, for as soon as Sophronia tumbled inside they hauled the rope ladder up after her and slammed the hatch closed. The wolf jumped up, crashing hard into the underside of the airship. Had the hull's wooden beams not been reinforced with iron bracings, Sophronia was certain they would have shattered.

"What does he think he can do?" wondered Vieve, while Sophronia recovered her breath and brushed herself off.

“I don’t think he’s *thinking* at all,” replied Sophronia, rising from her hands and knees to her feet, panting and shaking. *That* was the werewolf of her childhood nightmares. “Someone ought to lock him up! He’s dangerous,” she said finally, when she felt her voice wouldn’t shake.

“And he’s ruined your other petticoat.”

“Oh, goodness. How will we get it back? Someone might realize it was mine!”

“Not a chance. See?” Soap pointed down out of the hatch, which the sooties had cracked open slightly. He had his eyes pressed to the gap.

Sophronia went over and joined him. She looked down.

Captain Niall, having apparently resigned himself to losing his quarry, was savaging her horsehair petticoat into teeny, tiny shreds.

“Really, what did my poor petticoat do to offend?”

Vieve said, “I can see now that your insistence on ladies’ dress is very useful, in its way.”

Sophronia looked the nine-year-old over. “You going to give it a try, then?”

“I didn’t say it was *that* useful.”

Sophronia had a sudden, terrifying thought. “Oh, goodness, the other students! They don’t know Captain Niall is here, do they? What if they happen upon him on the way home from the play? We *must* warn them!”

“But how to warn them without explaining that you were out?” wondered Soap.

“I’ll claim I saw him out the parlor window. I must go.” Sophronia stood. She was covered in soot, her face smudged, her skirts flat, and her hair loose.

“But Miss Sophronia, *look* at you!”

“Can’t be helped, have to chance it. Lives are at stake.”

“But who are you going to tell? Everyone is at the theater.”

“Not *everyone*. Come on, Vieve! The last thing I need is to be trapped by mechanicals again. I need you and the obstructor.”

ATTACK OF THE FAN AND SPRINKLE

Sophronia and Vieve dashed through the airship ever upward and forward, making their way to the forbidden tassel section. They paused in front of Professor Braithwope's door.

"You had better make yourself scarce, Vieve. There's no point in both of us getting into trouble."

Vieve looked up at her, then nodded. "We must do this again soon."

"Perhaps without the werewolf attack and the loss of petticoat life?"

"Perhaps."

With which the young girl tipped her cap at Sophronia and retreated down the hall, one hand in her pocket, obstructor pointed out in front of her, whistling some French tune in the tones of the deeply satisfied.

Well, I'm delighted someone had an enjoyable evening, Sophronia thought before knocking loudly on the vampire's door.

There was good deal of clattering, a wet slurping noise, and the sound of india rubber squeaking, and then the door was opened a crack and Professor Braithwope peeked out.

"Whot, whot?" He had something dark about his mouth.

Oh, dear, thought Sophronia, *have I interrupted him at tea?* She tried to peek around him and catch a glimpse of whomever he might be supping with. But while the vampire was modestly sized, he occupied all of Sophronia's line of sight.

"Professor, I do so hate to disturb you, but I have urgent business requiring your immediate attention."

“Student, whot? By George, how’d you get into this section without setting off the alarms?”

“That’s not important, sir.”

“No, I think it might be.”

“Not *now*, sir. There is a problem, please, sir. It’s Captain Niall.”

“Werewolf, whot? What’s that to do with your getting into restricted areas of the school without a chaperone?”

“No, sir, he’s loose.”

“Of course he’s loose. Loose and leagues away, as he should be.”

“No, sir, he’s *here*.”

“On the ship, whot? Not possible. Werewolves don’t float.”

“No, sir, below. He’s here, on the moor, directly below, and the others should be returning from the theater soon. I saw him out my window.”

“Girlish fancies.”

“That’s possible, sir, but wouldn’t it be better to check and make certain?”

“Whot, whot? Yes, well. I suppose you’re right.”

“Quickly, sir. They’re due back at any moment.”

“Yes, yes. Where’s my hat?”

The vampire vanished for a split second and then pushed his way out into the hallway.

He was looking a tad disheveled, but he’d pulled on a greatcoat and buttoned it closed to disguise any possible fashion transgressions, and he had boots on his feet, which was more than might be said of a werewolf. Sophronia wasn’t certain, but she believed she might be coming down in favor of vampires as a general rule.

“Where is the blighter?”

“Below the boiler room area, sir. Last I saw.”

“Miss Temminnick.” The vampire tipped his hat and then sped away.

There was no point in even trying to keep up; he moved faster than any human could.

Oh, great, thought Sophronia. *Now how am I supposed to get back to my quarters?*

Vieve’s head reappeared around a bend in the hall. “Need a helping hand, or should I say wrist?” She waved the arm with the obstructor.

Sophronia grinned.

“So there we were, in all our evening’s finery, coming up the path toward the ship, and you will *never* guess what we observed! It was almost more exciting than the play itself. Although it *was* a very stirring performance of *An Ideal Bathtub*.” Dimity’s eyes were shining, her hands clasped together passionately, as she was thrust into the wondrousness of reliving the evening recently passed.

Sophronia, only slightly smudged, in a clean pinafore and her second-best set of petticoats, pretended rapt attention.

They were seated tête-à-tête on the settee while the other girls milled about, nattering about the finery of dress, the play, and the handsomeness of some boy or another—not necessarily in that order.

“Oh, what did you see?”

“Professor Braithwope, in a greatcoat!”

“Presumably he owns outerwear.”

Dimity left off clasping her hands to fiddle at something hanging about her neck.

Sophronia leaned forward. “Dimity, are you wearing *two* necklaces?”

“I couldn’t decide. But don’t distract me. Where was I?”

“On Professor Braithwope’s greatcoat.”

“Oh, yes. Don’t you believe greatcoats are rather a werewolf’s provenance? Not to mention the fact that vampires aren’t supposed to feel the cold. Anywho, where was I? Oh, yes. Professor Braithwope and his greatcoat were fighting a *werewolf*! Captain Niall!”

“Oh, how horrid.” Sophronia arranged her features into an appropriately shocked expression. Or what she hoped was appropriately shocked. She wasn’t doing very well in her acting lessons so far. *I probably look more like a stuffed squirrel.*

Dimity didn’t appear to think so. “Unfortunately, I didn’t see very much of the confrontation.”

“Was the exchange of fisticuffs that rapid? Supernatural speed, I understand.” Sophronia nodded wisely.

“Oh, no, there was blood, so I fainted.”

Preshea came over and stood before them, hands on hips, in nothing but her stays and drawers. *So immodest!*

“Sidheag caught her. Such a shame, Dimity, that you hadn’t arranged to faint earlier in the evening, when young Lord Dingleproops was paying you

so much attention."

Dimity blushed. "His parents are friends of the family, that is all!"

Sophronia ignored Preshea and looked to the other girls to continue the story where Dimity had fainted out of it. "What happened with the fisticuffs?"

"Not so many fists, actually. More fang and claw," said Agatha.

"Very well, what happened with the fangicuffs, then?"

"Oh Sophronia, you're *so* droll." Dimity prodded her playfully with one thumb.

Sidheag only smiled dryly and retreated. Monique was pointedly absorbed in examining a small tear in the trim of one sleeve, and Preshea turned away to do her hair in rags for the night.

Agatha came timidly to Sophronia's rescue. "Mademoiselle Geraldine also fainted. That freed Lady Linette to order some of the older girls into covert action. They've had lessons in group tactics for coordinated social rebuttal. She had them do the fan and sprinkle maneuver, to good effect."

"Fan and sprinkle?"

Monique snorted. "Oh, really, Sophronia, don't you know *anything*? Fan and sprinkle is for young ladies coping with werewolf attack while gentlemen are away. There have been *pamphlets* published!"

Sophronia looked to Agatha for further explanation, but the portly girl had lost all her pluck and retreated to a corner with a book on the language of parasols.

"Dimity, do you know what this maneuver is?"

Dimity hedged. "Well, I've heard of it, of course, but never seen it applied."

"And you didn't this evening, either. Really, Dimity, you must learn to time your faints with greater accuracy." Preshea's tone was condescending; rooming with Monique was turning out not to benefit her character.

Monique tsked. "It's very simple, really. Distract the werewolf."

"In this case, with a well-applied vampire," interjected Preshea, to Monique's annoyance.

Monique continued. "Then approach to within sprinkling distance. Sprinkle the werewolf, or his near proximity, liberally with noxious perfume—anything herbaceous does the trick, though basil is best, of course—as well as smelling salts, to encourage the inhalation. They have a

heightened sense of smell, werewolves. Then everyone takes up their fans and blows the fumes in the direction of the beast. The creature begins to sneeze uncontrollably, allowing one to escape. Voilà!"

"And is that what happened?" Sophronia looked to Preshea for confirmation. After all, Monique hadn't been on the theater excursion, either.

"Essentially. Although poor Professor Braithwope also got a big dose of perfume. But still, it distracted Captain Niall long enough for the professor to get the upper hand and drag him away. We managed to board the airship with impunity using the grand stairs."

Stairs? thought Sophronia. *This ship has stairs?*

Preshea concluded, "A very exciting end to the evening. But that's enough rough talk. Did you ladies see how many beaux I had surrounding me at the theater?"

"Not nearly so many as I might have had," shot back Monique. "I've already managed to make half of Bunson's fall madly in love with me; this year I shall get the other half." She looked about magnanimously. "Of course, you are allowed some, Preshea. I'm no glutton."

Preshea smiled in a way that had nothing to do with pleasure. "And then there's Lord Dingleproops; he's clearly in Dimity's pocket."

"I know, so peculiar. Well, I suppose there is no accounting for taste. No offense meant, of course, Dimity."

Dimity could clearly think of nothing to say to that. She looked as though she had swallowed a live eel.

Monique and Preshea continued to chat about the young men Preshea had met at the theater. Boys whom Monique already knew and about whom minutiae of appearance, financial situation, and social connection had to be told to Preshea in a most condescending way.

With the other girls thus distracted, Sophronia turned to Dimity and said in a low voice, "*Do* you like this Dingle personage?"

Dimity blushed in such a manner as indicated she might. Either that or she didn't like him at all. "He is quite tall for his age."

Sophronia tried to be sympathetic. "A good start, I suppose. Has he any other qualities of note?"

"He has a very nice nose."

"Good, a nose, excellent."

Dimity, who was rarely silent, fell quiet again at that juncture.

Sophronia tried to think of some other attribute a boy of interest to Dimity might possess. “Was he wearing anything sparkly?”

“He had a brass pin on his hatband.” Dimity looked a little disappointed, as if this were the merest of seeds before the great tree of her own adornments.

Two necklaces. Two! “And, um, is he smart?”

“Oh, Sophronia, that is hardly a desirable quality in a beau!”

“No? Is he a beau, then?”

“I am not allowed followers until I’m sixteen.”

“Well, then.”

The conversation paused.

Finally Dimity said, “Did you know my revolting brother wasn’t there? Scarpered off from the play. Apparently, he’s a bit of a pustule so far as the other boys are concerned. Not that I’m surprised. He’s probably going around correcting silly little mistakes and making himself unwelcome.”

“Or it could be they are browbeating him out of spite.”

“Oh, come now, I hardly think *boys* are like that.”

“Oh, no?” Sophronia, who had several brothers of her own, was startled at this outrageous statement.

“Girls, yes; boys, no. They are much more forthright.”

“Have you heard of the Pistons?”

“Yes; how did you…?”

Sophronia shrugged. “I’m learning my lessons at this school.”

“Pistons is some kind of Bunson’s school club, I gather. Lord Dingleproops is a member.”

“Is he indeed?”

“Yes, an engineering concentration. They put smudges of coal about their eyes. Very dark and brooding.”

“How sootie of them.”

Monique, whose own conversation had paused and who had taken to listening in on theirs, seemed unable to help interjecting at this juncture. “Sophronia, don’t even say such a thing! Imagine comparing highborn lords to, well, the lowest of the low. *Really.*”

“Sooties aren’t as bad as all that,” Sophronia protested, rather more loudly than she ought.

Preshea, Monique, and Agatha all stared at her in dumbfounded horror.

Sophronia was truculent. “They can hardly be blamed for their station!”

Monique said with confidence, “Yes, they most certainly can!”

“Oh, come now, the poor sooties only require some social reform and a little charitable assistance with their wardrobes,” said Dimity staunchly, no doubt thinking she was supporting Sophronia’s unusually progressive social stance.

Sophronia closed her eyes in horror at the very idea of Dimity trying to reform Soap. Or worse, taking him on as a *charity case*.

A loud knock sounded on their door.

Lady Linette’s voice said, “Gas out soon, ladies. You need your beauty rest. Well, most of you do, and there’s no cause to risk any of the others.”

“Yes, Lady Linette,” replied all the girls in singsong unison.

Lady Linette moved on without coming inside. It was school policy for the students not to be disturbed unduly during their spare time. Even children, Lady Linette said, must be allowed some time to conspire together.

Dimity leaned in as close to Sophronia as possible and whispered, “Why are you defending sooties? How do you even know them with any intimacy?”

“Information gathering, Dimity, remember? It’s what we do now.”

“Yes, but sooties? They can hardly be of any use. They live in the boiler room.”

Sophronia came up with her best excuse. “I need to feed Bumbersnoot, don’t I?”

Dimity blinked at her in silence, the concept of befriending sooties as alien to her as having to choose between two necklaces. “If you say so. Come on, let’s go to bed.”

But before they could leave the sitting room, another knock sounded, startling the girls. This was not part of their normal routine.

A male voice said, through the door, “Miss Temminnick, a word, if you would be so kind, whot?”

Preshea let out a little gasp and dove for her room, she being still in her underthings.

Sophronia glanced about. “Agatha, pick your gloves up off the floor. Dimity, you aren’t wearing shoes.” Once the others were back in reasonable

order, Sophronia opened the door.

"How can I help you, Professor Braithwope?"

The vampire was looking once more like his dandy self: no greatcoat. "Ah, good, you are not abed yet. Take a little walk with me, if you would, Miss Temminnick?"

Sophronia curtsied and reached for her wrap from a nearby hat stand. The other girls watched in dumb silence. Sophronia gave them all a quelling look and followed the vampire.

As she was in the company of a professor, none of the mechanicals were aggravated by Sophronia roaming the ship after hours. Professor Braithwope led her up and out onto a small balcony that bridged the gap between the middle and forward sections. They stood staring out at the clouds and the moon setting over the moor.

Finally Sophronia said, "Sir?"

"You understand, Miss Temminnick, that I am a vampire."

"Yes, sir, I had noticed the fangs."

"Don't be pert, young lady."

"Yes, sir."

"Yet I am tethered to this roaming ship far from all meaningful society."

"Yes, sir. But you did go down to the ground to fight Captain Niall."

"I am not a vampire queen to have so short a tether as all *that*."

"I see, sir." Although she didn't. *Why did that make him defensive?*

"Tonight when you came to my room…"

Sophronia cocked her head, remembering what must have been blood around his mouth. "I didn't hear or see anything. Although I have been wondering, sir, *how* you eat? Or should I say *who*?"

The vampire said nothing.

Have I revealed that I saw too much? Quietly Sophronia added, "And the soot on my dress, sir?"

"I didn't see anything." Professor Braithwope smiled down at her, showing a small hint of fang.

Sophronia grinned back. "I'm glad we understand each other, sir."

The vampire looked out into the night. "This is the right finishing school for you, isn't it, whot?"

“Yes, sir, I think it might very well be.”

“A piece of advice, Miss Temminnick?”

“Sir?”

“It is a great skill to have friends in low places. They, too, have things to teach you.”

“Now, sir, I thought you didn’t see any soot.”

Professor Braithwope laughed. “Good night, Miss Temminnick. I trust you can make your own way back to your room without causing an alarm? It seems to be a particular skill of yours.”

“Actually, sir, I could use your escort tonight.”

“Whot, whot? Interesting.”

“Even a vampire can be surprised on occasion?”

“Miss Temminnick, why do you think I became a teacher?”

They turned together and walked back toward the students’ residential section.

Sophronia thought hard about what it must be like to live forever. *I suppose one would get bored easily. That’s one thing about Mademoiselle Geraldine’s. So far, it’s not been remotely dull.* What she said was, “It can’t be all that bad, being away from cities. You’re one of the few vampires who gets to travel.”

“So long as we don’t go too high.”

“Really?”

“Whot, whot, there goes that curious mind of yours, Miss Temminnick. I think perhaps there has been enough of *that*, for the time being.”

They arrived back at her door.

“Good night, Miss Temminnick.”

“Good night, Professor.”

School life carried on course after that, as did the school itself, except that it did so in the gray, as Lady Linette called it. It turned out mail had been retrieved from Swiffle-on-Exe when they stopped over for the play. Sophronia’s loot was comprised of a package of clothing, including her winter cape, and one uninformative letter from her mother. They were told they could not send replies. Swiffle-on-Exe was already leagues behind them. The school’s deadline from the flywaymen had been exceeded and

they were now on the run and in hiding.

The great airship floated deep into the gray of the wild moor. The mists were more common and longer lasting now that autumn was upon them. Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality did not go low; lessons with Captain Niall were canceled for the time being. They had enough fuel and supplies for a good, long stint away from civilization. So they floated, shrouded by cool, wet gray, hidden from friends and enemies alike—for *three whole months*.

At about a month in, Sophronia overheard Monique complaining to Preshea about the ban on outside communication. Clearly the restrictions had finally gotten to her, and she hadn't managed to get her message out on the night Sophronia, Soap, and Vieve had infiltrated Bunson's.

"I cannot believe they won't let me—*me!*—send a message."

"They aren't letting anyone, Monique. I heard Sophronia complaining about it only the other day."

"But mine is *terribly* important."

"Oh, really? Is it an order for next summer's hats?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Something like." Monique neatly avoided Preshea's interest. "Gloves and a few fans as well."

Sophronia discussed the conversation with Dimity later that evening.

"I really do think that Monique was hoping to get information to someone about where she hid the prototype. Do you suppose the teachers actually imprisoned her on the evening of the theater jaunt in an effort to prevent this from happening? I mean to say, I saw neither hide nor hair of her all evening."

Dimity's round porcelain face scrunched up in suspicion. "That's a terribly medieval approach. I can't imagine they'd be that strict with her."

Sophronia lay back. "Dimity, we are missing something."

"On board? Decent cheese," suggested Dimity.

"No, I mean, if Monique hid it somewhere, why did we never see her do it? Is it still in the carriage, do you think? Were you ever separated from her during the beginning of the journey?"

"Only when she went to interview you."

"Of course! Dimity, you're brilliant!"

"I am?"

"While I was packing, she asked Mumsy if she might take a turn about

the grounds. The prototype must be hidden at *my house*!”

“Goodness gracious, I suppose you’re right. Oh, Sophronia, what if the flywaymen figure that out? Or what if Monique is working for someone else even more sinister, and *they* figure that out?”

Sophronia’s stomach twisted in panic. “Then my family might be in danger. I must get a message to them somehow!”

Of course, Sophronia could no more send out a letter than Monique could. She and Dimity even made an abortive attempt at pigeon training. The pigeon was *not interested*. Sophronia began to see the appeal behind the transmission machine and the prototype. She tried to talk herself down. *I am, after all, the only one who knows Monique was alone for that small space of time. And even if the flywaymen do figure it out, they will, hopefully, use nonviolent stealth to retrieve the prototype, and leave my parents and siblings alone.*

On Intermingling the Classes

Professor Braithwope took on some of their weapons training, giving them tips on how to wield a cane versus a parasol versus an umbrella, and the correct application of each to the skull or posterior as occasion demanded. Like Captain Niall, he seemed particularly pleased with Sidheag's abilities in this arena.

"Some slight advantage to being raised by soldiers." After lessons, Sidheag was self-effacing about the extra attention.

"So sad there don't appear to be any other advantages." Monique sniffed.

Sidheag's shoulders slumped.

Sophronia and Dimity exchanged a look and caught up to the other girl, one on each side.

"Don't let Monique bother you. You know how she gets," said Sophronia sympathetically.

Dimity was more direct. "She's a pollock."

Sidheag looked back and forth between the two of them. Then she shrugged. "I don't intend to be here much longer, regardless. She may do as she pleases."

Sophronia decided at that juncture that she'd had enough of Sidheag's recalcitrant nature. She'd put up with it for months. Preshea and Agatha were hopeless. But Sidheag had the makings of a decent friend if she would only open up a bit. Sophronia grabbed the taller girl by the arm and steered her out onto a balcony, rather than to their next lesson.

“What are you—?” The Scotswoman was clearly startled.

So was Dimity, who, with a little *eep!* noise, followed.

Sophronia braced herself, put her hands on her hips, and faced Lady Kingair. Mademoiselle Geraldine’s did not encourage unequivocal confrontation under any circumstances. But Sophronia had a feeling that it was necessary with Sidheag.

“You must stop being so afraid of us,” she said.

Of all the things Sidheag had been expecting, this was clearly not one of them. The taller girl actually sputtered. Finally she managed, “Afraid? Afraid!”

“Sophronia, what are you doing?” hissed Dimity, backing away from both girls.

“Sidheag, whether you like it or not, you are stuck here for *years*. Slouching about like a grump won’t get you anywhere. You might as well learn what is being taught and attempt to get along with some of us.”

“It’s all chattering behind one another’s backs. I dinna ken how females manage it.”

Dimity said, timidly, “Like it or not, Sidheag, you are actually a girl.”

“For my sins.”

Sophronia had an idea. *Perhaps Sidheag simply wants to be included in something.* With a guilty look at Dimity, she asked, “How good are you at climbing, Lady Kingair?”

Sidheag was startled by the change of topic. “Do ya ken that’s what I mean? Why ask me an obscure question? Why not tell me forthright what you think we should do and why it might help?”

Sophronia wondered, what with Vieve skulking about, how she ended up at a finishing school surrounded by girls who would rather be boys. *Well, except Dimity, of course.*

Dimity said, even though the conversation had already moved on, “What’s wrong with liking girly things? I like petticoats and dancing and perfume and hats and brooches and necklaces and—” Her eyes glazed over slightly as she contemplated sparkles.

She seemed likely to continue in this vein for some time, so Sophronia interrupted her. “I have someone I think you should meet, Sidheag. By way of a coal supplier.”

Dimity blinked. “How could coal possibly help, Sophronia? Are you

cracked?”

“Have faith, Dimity. Well, Sidheag, *can* you climb?”

“Of course.”

“Tonight, then?”

Which was how Sophronia ended up introducing Lady Kingair to a group of sooties.

“Good evening, miss!” Soap grinned at her as she climbed up through the hatch. She’d tried to visit once every other week ever since the school had gone to gray. Soap, as a result, was only becoming more and more familiar, and more and more captivating. Sophronia would rather she didn’t enjoy his company so much—he was so very dirty, and so very unsuitable, and so very boy, but there it was: liking him couldn’t be helped.

“Good evening, Soap, how’s the boiler room treating you?”

“Topping, miss, topping! You’ve brought a friend. You’ve never brought a friend afore now. I figured you didn’t have any. Save us, a’course.” He chuckled.

“This here is Miss Maccon. Sidheag, this is Soap, and these are the sooties.” Sophronia made a wide gesture to include both the small collective hovering around Soap and the others scurrying back and forth behind him. She didn’t give out Sidheag’s title, afraid Soap and the others might be cowed by rank.

Sidheag didn’t object to the demotion. She’d climbed up through the hatch and inside and was looking around with eyes as big as saucers. “What *is* this place?”

“Boiler room, miss. Ain’t it grand? Lifeblood of the ship down ’ere. How-d’ye-do? I’m Phineas B. Crow. But most calls me Soap.”

Sidheag grinned at him. A real grin, with no caution or stiffness to it. *That’s more like it*, thought Sophronia.

While Soap pointed out the wonders of the boiler room to their new visitor with great pride, Sophronia turned to the other sooties. She emptied her pockets of the treats and nibbles she’d filched at high tea the day before, passing them out to the waiting group. It had taken her a few visits to realize the sooties were not, in fact, fed so well as the students, instead subsisting mainly on porridge, bread, and stew.

She pretended to be fully absorbed in distributing tiny lemon tarts so that Soap could work his inexplicable charm on Sidheag. No one could help but like Soap. Anyone not immediately set against him for the color of his skin or his station in life was bound to enjoy his company. And Sidheag might be many things, but Sophronia didn't think her particularly bigoted.

The tarts were Dimity's idea of reform. Sophronia had agreed to distribute them to the sooties so long as Dimity agreed not to try anything else altruistic. Nevertheless, Dimity had watched her creep out that night with an expression that was part fear and part jealousy. "Why take Sidheag, but not me?"

"But Dimity, you can't climb."

"I could try!"

"And you don't like getting dirty."

"I could wear my oldest dress."

"And you aren't interested in boiler rooms."

"But they clearly need my help! If I am to be a proper lady I must practice charitable endeavors as soon as possible. I want to be *good*."

"Be sensible instead!"

Dimity had only pouted.

So Sophronia was stuck passing out lemon tarts. She was paying so little attention to Sidheag and Soap that when the scuffle started, it took her a moment to react. They were fighting! *Oh, no, did I misjudge Sidheag?*

But a quick observation proved the fight was not with any real intent.

Sidheag and Soap were squared off, fencing, each with a stoking pole and a fierce expression. They were almost matched to each other by height, and they were also causing a stir of excitement. The sooties about them began to place bets, wagering the lemon tarts Sophronia had taken such care to distribute fairly.

"What are you two up to?"

"This is brilliant, Sophronia. Did you know this boy knows proper streetside fisticuffs?" Sidheag's dour face was animated with delight.

"Does he?" *Streetside, but he lives in the air?*

"Dirty fighting. It's capital! Look at this!"

Soap ducked in under Sidheag's swing and kicked her ankle.

Sophronia was shocked. *One is not meant to ever kick during a fight! It isn't gentlemanly, isn't proper, isn't done!* "Soap, that's unscrupulous!"

Soap stopped and turned to grin at her. “Yes, miss, but it works.”

While he was distracted, Sidheag poked him in the side with her pole.

Soap let out a *woof* and doubled over.

Sidheag came up next to him, and after he managed to straighten, threw a companionable arm around his soot-covered shoulders. She was more relaxed than Sophronia had ever seen her. “It makes sense. Why should we fight like gentlemen? After all, as you keep reminding me, Sophronia, we *aren’t* gentlemen. We aren’t even soldiers. We’re supposed to be intelligencers. We should learn to fight dirty. We should learn to fight any way we can.”

Sophronia tried to put her doubts aside and be sensible. It was more difficult than she thought. “That’s reasonable, I suppose. But kicking?”

“Well, miss, not to be rude, but you ladies aren’t sooties or soldiers. You don’t have much in the way of arm muscle. You ought to be kicking more; you’ve got more power in your legs, don’t ya? And you’re usually wearing them sharp-toed boots.”

Sophronia nodded. “Good point. But we’re also wearing lots of skirts.”

“Could get special boots made with metal reinforcements and attachments,” said Sidheag.

“Sidheag Maccon, did I just hear you mention designing a fashion accessory?” Sophronia made her tone all-over appalled, but she was thinking, *Vieve could do something along those lines.*

Sidheag grinned. Another one of those genuine smiles that made her look, if not pretty, at least less plain. It crinkled up her remarkable caramel eyes and softened her normally harsh features. Sophronia, at that moment, decided that the idea to bring Sidheag among the sooties was a resounding success.

But then a looming shadow appeared above them and said, “What’s this, what’s this?”

“Greaser—scatter!” yelled Soap.

Sophronia and Sidheag did as directed, running hard alongside the sooties down and around the back of one of the coal piles and squeezing into a crevice.

Soap, who was a noble idiot, intercepted the greaser.

“He isn’t going to get booted off school grounds for this, is he?” Sophronia asked, her heart sinking.

“What, Soap? For stopping and engaging in some mock swordplay?” One of the other sooties scoffed.

“So long as they didn’t mark you ladies as Uptops, the most he’ll get is an ear-boxing,” added another.

“Greasers like him. He keeps us all in line, and he works harder than any two of us put together,” explained the first.

Sophronia and Sidheag both let out sighs of relief.

Sidheag turned to her. “This is fun!”

“Finishing school’s not all bad, now, is it?”

“It’s not fair. I’m your first friend here! Why is it you persist in skulking off with Sidheag all the time?” Dimity was clearly trying not to whine.

“I hardly persist; we only go off once a week or so.”

“And you two keep giggling together about things.”

“I do *not* giggle without purpose. Lady Linette says you should never misapply a giggle. And Sidheag never giggles at all.”

“Well, it’s definitely not fair.” Dimity was perched on the edge of her bed, looking down at her feet sadly.

“She’s been helping me with fighting techniques.”

“I could use extra fight training.”

“Dimity, you don’t even *want* to learn. You told me you decided to entirely give over that subject. That you really only wanted to be a lady.”

Dimity sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

Bumbersnoot, who was snuffling around the bed frame looking optimistically for a stray lump of coal or perhaps a small spider he might incinerate, came waddling over.

Dimity patted him on the head, and he blew a little blast of smoke out one ear.

Sophronia nibbled a fingertip in thought. “I tell you what—how about you help me with etiquette in court and ball settings? You’re much better at remembering the order of precedence than I.”

Dimity brightened.

Which was how Dimity and Sophronia ended up doing extra practice in the evenings. After some initial reticence, Sidheag joined them. Dimity managed to recover from her jealousy and, as a result, attacked the Scottish

girl with her customary rapid-chatter teasing, which prodded Sidheag out of her awkward ways. In exchange, Sidheag started showing Dimity some of the easier knife tricks. No blood, of course. Nothing further was said about mysterious late-night jaunts.

"I don't feel like I'm really contributing to our little study group," Sophronia said to Dimity one night before they went to sleep.

"Don't be silly, Sophronia; you're the best of any of us."

Sophronia could feel herself blushing. "I'm not!"

"'Course you are. We simply haven't covered your subject yet in classes."

"Oh, really, and what's that?"

"You see opportunities. And you learn things and combine them in ways the rest of us don't."

Sophronia contemplated this. "I do?"

"I wager you've made a million connections in that brain of yours that I've never even considered. You say things to teachers that I know you've never told me. You've gone places on this airship I don't even know exist. Then again, you aren't always the most ladylike about it."

Sophronia remained silent.

"For example, your two best petticoats are missing. They vanished the night of the play."

"You noticed that?" *How embarrassing. If Dimity noticed my lack of proper foundation garments, why, anyone else might have as well—Monique, or Professor Braithwope!*

"I *always* notice clothing. I can't imagine you sat around all evening in this room alone that night, either."

"But…!"

Dimity lay back on her pillow and sounded self-satisfied. "I know you think I'm only paying attention to the etiquette side of our training, but I can't help picking other stuff up along the way. I may want to be a lady, but I'm learning how to be an intelligencer whether I like it or not. And you *are* my closest friend."

"So you spy on me?"

Sophronia could only just make out the movement of a shrug under Dimity's covers. "I'm not Monique. I'm not going to use it against you."

"She hasn't done anything to me directly since she turned me in."

“I know. Doesn’t that worry you?”

“Yes. I think she’s still trying to get a message off the ship. Luckily, she’s as stymied as I am.” Sophronia felt, rather fancifully, that they were lost forever, floating in the mist. Time had taken on an atmospheric quality.

“Do you think she knows that we know?”

“I certainly hope not.”

The two girls went silent.

Finally Sophronia said, “You really do care about clothing and fashion, don’t you, Dimity?”

“Very much. It’s important—even Lady Linette says it’s a method of manipulation. You can dictate what people think of you simply by wearing the right gloves, not to mention jewelry.”

Sophronia was lost in remembering that second flywaymen battle. “What would you say of a man who went *floating* in fine evening dress and a top hat with a green ribbon about it?”

“Run,” Dimity answered instantly. Her voice, normally full of bright fun and mockery, had taken on a completely sober tone.

“Why?”

“I don’t know about you, Sophronia, but I’m certainly not ready to meet a Pickleman face-to-face. Not yet.”

“Ah, of course. And what, exactly, is a Pickleman?”

“You don’t know?”

“How would I?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting you’re a covert recruit. You seem to be so very much one of us.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“Careful—wouldn’t want Monique finding out you like it here. She’ll make it her business to get you turned out. Anyway, Picklemen are sort of in charge of all kinds of important things. Not exactly legally, and rarely nicely. They like to collect money and power. That’s pretty much all I know. Oh, and their leader is called the Great Chutney.”

Sophronia’s eyebrows arched. “Well, if you say so.”

Dimity sat up, looking worried. “Do you think Monique might be working for *them*?”

“No, they’re clearly backing the flywaymen, or employing them. And remember, Monique refused to cooperate. If she were working with them,

why the theatrics in the road? Why not just hand over the prototype? Why hide it at my house?"

"So if she's not working for them and she's not working for our school, who is she working for?"

"Herself? Her family? I don't know—the vampires, maybe? Even the werewolves. Or perhaps one of the teachers is a traitor. We already know she has one of them defending her."

Dimity looked nervous. "Are you sure we should be involving ourselves? Isn't this something for the adults to sort out?"

Sophronia gave an evil little grin. "I'm thinking of it as training. Besides, if the prototype is at my house, I *am* involved. Monique involved me."

Dimity only nodded. "I still don't like how quiet she's been. We should be on our guard."

"Agreed."

Dimity's warning came none too soon, for having finally given up on trying to send a message, Monique turned her unwelcome attention once more to being a plonker.

Sophronia was minding her own business and running late to luncheon, as was her custom. She'd yet to learn the advantage of punctuality. As she told Sister Mattie the third time she was late to household potions and poisons, nothing interesting happened until *after* an event commenced. Her natural tardiness was compounded by the fact that she was trying to find time for all her classes; extra work in fan languages and how to plan a five-course meal; visits to sooties; and practicing with Sidheag and Dimity when no one was watching. There never seemed to be enough time.

So she was late to the dining hall, dashing in through the door, when someone stuck out one booted foot and she went flying.

Luckily, they'd learned some tumbling. Sophronia went head over heels, landing in a crouch on one knee with the other bent in what might be considered a mockery of a full court bow. It could have been graceful, except she tore her hem as she tried to rise, tripped to the side, and crashed into an unsuspecting senior girl.

By that point, the entire school had turned to watch her, and a wave of

giggles rippled through the hall.

Sophronia was absolutely mortified. She'd been trying so hard to learn to at least pretend to be proper and well-mannered.

Mademoiselle Geraldine said, "Miss Temminnick! Is there a problem?"

"No, Headmistress." She could feel herself blushing furiously. It reminded her of the incident with the dumbwaiter and the trifle—only now she cared. *Stupid finishing school,* she thought, *teaching me to care about such things.*

"Where is your poise, young lady?"

"I seem to have misplaced it on someone's boot, Headmistress."

Professor Lefoux glared at her. "What was that? Excuses? Don't be smart, young lady."

"No, Professor. Apologies, Headmistress."

Lady Linette said with quiet firmness, "Miss Temminnick, go back out and reenter the room properly."

"Yes, my lady." Sophronia turned and marched from the room, and then came back in. This time she kept her eyes firmly to the ground, even though she knew everyone was watching her and they had recently had lessons in how to walk with one's nose in the air.

She saw a boot twitch as if it wanted to head out and trip her a second time. The boot was of peach-colored kid leather, with pink ribbons for laces and a shockingly high heel. The person attached to it was Monique de Pelouse.

Monique smiled sweetly at her and then turned and said in a very loud voice, "Isn't it *so intelligent* of Miss Temminnick to wear blue? With her complexion, it really is the only safe color. How unfortunate the dress couldn't be cut a tad more modern, poor dear."

Sophronia, stewing gently in annoyance, went to sit at the other end of the table. *Why does Monique impose upon us,* she wondered, *just for torture? I know she's been demoted, but I'm certain she could still sit with the senior girls. Give them the benefit of her scintillating conversation.*

"Don't worry, Sophronia," said Monique, "I'm sure no one saw your gaffe." At which Preshea tittered obligingly.

Sophronia didn't point out that Monique had tripped her, as she knew it would only sound defensive.

Dimity said, "You're not usually that clumsy."

“No, that’s *my* role,” added Agatha with a shy smile.

Sophronia looked down the table at Monique. “You’re right, I’m not.”

Monique wasn’t finished, either. After tea, distracted by the prospect of a quadrille lesson with Mademoiselle Geraldine during which they had been instructed by Lady Linette to try passing secret messages without being caught by the headmistress, Sophronia and the others neglected to notice that Agatha wasn’t with them. The poor thing wasn’t *exactly* a friend, but they did try to keep an eye on her, as they might Bumbersnoot.

When Agatha finally joined them, some ten minutes late to class, her eyes were red. Mademoiselle Geraldine gave her a stern talking-to on the subject of tardiness, which started her crying.

“Now, dear, there is no use wasting tears on me; I’m not a man. Besides, you are clearly not the kind of young lady to cry with any form or grace. Your skin becomes blotchy.”

Monique slid into the room gracefully at that juncture and glided to the back of the assembled girls without being observed. She was used to manipulating Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“Yes, Headmistress,” Agatha replied, trying to stop her tears.

“No, no, not with the sleeve. Dear, how many times do I have to tell you? You must never wipe any part of your face with your sleeve. That is what a handkerchief is for. And even then we dab. Ladies *dab*! Where is your handkerchief?”

Agatha fished about hopelessly in her reticule.

“No handkerchief, Agatha Woosmoss? What kind of young lady of *qualit-tay* are you?”

“I am sorry, Headmistress.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine turned to face the class. “Ladies, where do we always stash a spare handkerchief?”

“In our décolletage,” sang out everyone in unison.

The headmistress smiled brightly, tossing her red curls and thrusting her own substantial décolletage forward as if in agreement.

“She could stash a whole cotton mill in hers,” Sophronia whispered to Dimity.

Dimity pursed her lips to stop herself from laughing.

Mademoiselle Geraldine continued, “Show me, ladies!”

Obligingly, all the girls reached into their cleavage and pulled out

squares of fine muslin. Being only thirteen or fourteen, few had sufficient cleavage to fish handkerchiefs out of, except Monique. Sidheag was a veritable beanpole. Sophronia felt her own wasn't bad. Preshea, of course, was perfect. Dimity said she thought the smaller girl stuffed. "You understand. With rosemary sachets." Dimity described herself as "lamentably undersized."

Sidheag seemed to be having difficulty following Mademoiselle Geraldine's instructions.

"Lady Kingair, where is your handkerchief?"

"Well, blast it. I put it in. It seems to have slipped down inside my corset."

Mademoiselle Geraldine fanned herself. "Lady Kingair, there is no need to go into detail. A lady of *qualit-tay* does not mention such a thing out loud."

"What? What did I say?" Sidheag was genuinely confused.

"Corset," hissed Sophronia.

"Miss Temminnick! Not you, too."

"I beg your pardon, Headmistress." Sophronia executed an almost perfect curtsy. This seemed to mollify Mademoiselle Geraldine.

"She doesn't have enough to hold it up, Headmistress," said Monique.

"Hush now, Miss Pelouse. We do not talk about another lady's endowments in public. Lady Kingair, my dear, did you put the handkerchief in before or after you laced this morning?"

"Before; otherwise I forget," Sidheag answered promptly.

"Well, you must wait to put it in after. Then it won't disappear on you. Miss Temminnick, lend Miss Woosmoss your spare, please? Then at least she will have something. Now, ladies, where was I? Oh, yes, the quadrille."

Agatha took her place in the set with Sidheag and Dimity. Sophronia stepped in to be her partner and passed her the handkerchief. Agatha stuffed it down her bodice with a muttered "thank you."

"Ladies, we begin with the *Le Pantalon*. And a one, two, three, four. Step forward, salutation to your partner—no, Miss Buss, you're playing the man, remember? You bow." The headmistress was making up the fourth in the other set with Monique, Preshea, and a mop dressed in a hat. They were having a much more difficult time trying to pass notes back and forth without her noticing. The mop, of course, was of absolutely no help.

“What happened, Agatha? Are you feeling quite the thing?” Sophronia asked when the dance permitted conversation.

“It’s nothing to concern you.”

“Let me guess—Monique?” While she talked, Sophronia slipped Dimity a small, folded bit of paper. There was nothing on the paper; it was only for technique.

Sidheag said, “I saw that.”

Dimity whispered, “Perhaps note-passing is better done during *L’été*?”

Agatha said, answering Sophronia’s question, “She’s evil. And not in a good way.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing of import.” Agatha’s face was red. “Not for *you*, anyway.” The way she said it implied that Sophronia was somehow to blame.

They moved on from *Le Pantalon* to *L’été*. As Dimity had predicted, it was easier to pass the notes, but Agatha kept dropping hers. Every time she did so, everyone had to stop the pattern while she looked under her full skirts to try to find the scrap of paper. It was decidedly *not covert*. They had to pretend she was lacing her boot.

At the end of the hour, Mademoiselle Geraldine clapped her hands to get their attention. “That was adequate, ladies, but only adequate. You are to practice the first two sections of the quadrille ten times over this evening. In our next lesson, we will move on to the *La Poule*, so I expect you to have the *Le Pantalon* memorized.”

“Do you think,” Sophronia wondered to Dimity as they left the headmistress’s classroom, “that she realizes she is saying ‘the’ twice?”

Dimity raised an eyebrow. “Why, Sophronia, are you implying Mademoiselle Geraldine is not actually French? Shocking suggestion.”

“Any more than Lady Linette is a lady?” added Sophronia.

“Oh, come now, she could be a lady, you can’t be certain of that. After all, Sidheag is a lady, and no one would ever have guessed *that*.”

“Oh, thank you very much, Dimity,” said Sidheag from where she stalked along behind them.

Dimity tilted her curly head back and over one shoulder, looking up at the tall girl with a cheeky grin. “Oh, don’t pretend to be offended. I’ve figured you *all* out now. You’ll take that as a compliment. You don’t really *want* to be a lady. That’s your whole difficulty.”

Sidheag muttered something about who would want to be a lady when she could be a werewolf, which everyone politely ignored. Such an idea was patently ridiculous. Everyone knew girls couldn't be werewolves.

It was Dimity who found out what happened to Agatha. Dimity might not be very good at finding out anything about prototypes, or world domination, or next day's tea cakes, but she certainly had an ear for gossip.

"Did you hear Monique cornered Agatha in the hallway this afternoon? Apparently she said she wondered how someone of Agatha's vulgar proportions even got admitted to Mademoiselle Geraldine's. She said that Agatha probably wouldn't be asked back after the winter break, even if she did come from a long line of intelligencers. She said you would take Agatha's place, since there was no one better."

"Oh, dear, no wonder Agatha was mad at me. It's not true, is it?" In normal finishing schools, the general attitude was the more students the better, but this one was different. *Perhaps on an airship number restrictions have to be followed.*

Dimity chewed her bottom lip. "It's possible. Not that you'd take her place, but that she might not make it through. I don't mean to be unkind, but she really isn't very good. She might be better off at a real finishing school, and even then… I mean to say, have you *seen* her? It's not so much her figure as her confidence." Dimity shook her curly head in sympathy. "If only her posture were improved."

They heard a little gasp from the doorway and looked up to see Agatha's round, crestfallen face as she ducked away.

"I thought you closed that!" Dimity said to Sophronia, horrified.

"I thought I did, too. Perhaps she's not so bad an intelligencer as you thought."

Dimity was clearly upset with herself. Dimity was many things, but no one would call her mean-spirited. "Should I go after her, do you think?"

Sophronia sighed. "Perhaps we both should."

They went to knock on the other girl's door. Sidheag opened it, wearing a sour expression. *Well, more sour than usual.* "She doesn't want to talk to you."

"We came to apologize." Dimity looked hopeful.

“Well, it’s a bit late for that.” Sidheag crossed her arms over her bony chest and glared at them.

“Oh, don’t take that attitude with us, Sidheag Maccon. We know you’re not so bad as you make out.” Sophronia pushed past the taller girl and into the room. Dimity followed, shutting the door firmly behind them.

Agatha and Sidheag’s chamber was much the same in structure and layout as Sophronia and Dimity’s. Which is to say it was small, with two beds, two wardrobes, and a vanity with a wash basin, and not much else. It did not, however, have Dimity’s touch. Dimity’s touch in their sleeping chamber involved draping brightly colored silk scarves on all the surfaces and pinning sparkly glass brooches to them. Sophronia didn’t mind, although she did think it made the place look a little like an opera singer’s boudoir.

Dimity approached the bed where Agatha lay facedown in a hunch, head buried in her pillow. “I’m sorry, Agatha, I shouldn’t have said that.”

Agatha didn’t move.

Sophronia came over and said, “Couldn’t you let us help you, just a little bit? I mean, we are *trying* with Sidheag.”

Sidheag snorted.

“Well, we *are*. She helps us with boy-type stuff, and we coach her in how to be a girl.”

Sidheag snorted again.

Sophronia gave her a look. “Well, we *do*. You’re simply bad at it!”

Dimity patted Agatha on the back. “We could do it with you, too.”

Agatha sniffed and rolled over. Her face was, as Mademoiselle Geraldine had pointed out, very blotchy indeed. “But what can I exchange?” she asked shakily.

Sophronia and Dimity grappled for a reply.

Finally Sophronia said, “You’re good at sums and calculating household management. I heard Sister Mattie compliment you the other day. And we could all use help being more mild-mannered. You are particularly good at *that*.”

Dimity came in to assist. “Yes, I talk too much, and Sophronia is overly bold.”

“How kind of you to say, Dimity.” Sophronia raised her eyebrows.

“And of course Sidheag is perfectly hopeless,” added Dimity.

“Yes, thank you, Dimity.”

“Well, it’s true!” Dimity was truculent.

Agatha started to chuckle damply. “There you go, talking too much again, right, Dimity?”

“See, that’s the spirit!” said Sophronia.

Keeping Proper Records and How to Steal Them

So their little private study parties of three became four. If Agatha observed Sophronia and Sidheag's occasional jaunts to the boiler room, there was one thing Agatha was really very good at, and that was holding her tongue. Their private club didn't help modify Monique's behavior, however. Later that week, a rumor sprouted up that Dimity had stepped out with Lord Dingleproops, alone and unchaperoned.

Dimity was absolutely crestfallen. "I never! I'm a good girl, much to Mummy's disappointment. We always stayed in company. Besides, I don't think he likes me in that way."

Sophronia began pacing about the room. "Monique started the rumor, I know it. Something is going to have to be done about her."

"I don't think any of us are ready for a full-on covert reputation destruction. Monique has four extra years' training. She may not be a natural intelligencer, but she certainly is a natural pain." Dimity chewed her lip, still upset.

"She's a natural cod-slinger, is what she is." Sidheag had rather taken to Dimity. *Dimity is like that; she wears you down eventually.*

"Sidheag, language!" Dimity gasped, then she turned to Sophronia. "What do you suggest?"

"I don't know yet, but it had better be good. And something where I don't get caught or turned in."

Dimity, who was on Sidheag's bed, flipped over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. "You mean to say, where *we* won't get caught."

"We?"

"I'm going to help you," said Dimity.

"Me, too," insisted Sidheag.

"And me, though I probably won't be much good," said Agatha.

"And there's Bumbersnoot—he'll help," added Dimity.

"Really? What's Bumbersnoot's difficulty with Monique?"

Dimity considered this seriously. "I don't know, but I wager he has one. Oh, she dented him once. Didn't she, Snooty darling?"

Sophronia took a deep breath. "We could go after the prototype. That would show them all. And she wouldn't be able to pass it on to her employer, whoever that is."

Sidheag and Agatha, who hadn't really been involved in her covert investigations thus far, looked as though they were trying hard to understand what she was talking about.

"So what's the plan, then?" asked Sidheag.

"You're not going to like it."

"Why not?"

"It involves a ball."

Sidheag and Agatha paled at the very idea.

"I'm not ready for a ball!" said the taller girl with an uncharacteristic look of panic.

"Oooh, a ball." Dimity clapped her hands.

"Well, there's one the night I return home. It's a good excuse to bring you three to visit. I can't write to ask, of course. But it will be an excellent cover for searching the house and grounds while Frowbritcher and the other mechanicals are distracted."

"But that's the start of winter holidays. How are we to get the prototype into the appropriate hands?" Dimity wanted to know. "Even supposing we do find it."

"That's the other part of the plan. Someone told the school to recruit me. We have to figure out who reported on me to Lady Linette. We find out who that person is, we can give her the prototype."

"I don't suppose you know who that might be, do you?"

Sophronia grinned again. "No, but—"

Dimity said, “I know that look. That’s the look she gets right before she goes off exploring.”

“But?” prompted Sidheag.

“But we could break into the school records to find out.”

“Sophronia, that’s a terrible idea!” protested Dimity.

“You’re mad,” added Sidheag.

Agatha only looked wide-eyed.

“Ah, but I have the trump card.”

“You do?”

“Oh, yes. I’m going to borrow an obstructor and some soap.”

“I could, but it’ll take a long time. I spent years learning how. I’m thinking you need it before the holidays?”

Soap and Sophronia were sitting watching Sidheag take on a small herd of sooties in a rousing game of dice during a break in the late-night shift. The two girls had come for coal and stayed for conversation and, in Sidheag’s case, gambling. She really was a lost cause. Sophronia had hoped she might get Soap to teach her his neat trick of getting inside locked doors.

She nodded glumly.

“What do you want to know lock-picking for, anyway?” Soap asked.

“I need to find out about school-affiliated intelligencers in my home area who might have recruited me for Mademoiselle Geraldine’s.”

“You’re wanting to break into the record room?”

“That’s about the sum of it.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Soap, what if you get caught up top?”

“Now, there, miss, you think every time you come visit us we aren’t at risk? It’s a good thing there are so many sooties and so many places to hide. And that you bribe all of us with them smallish cakes. Because otherwise someone would have long since put a stop to these little visits of yours.”

Sophronia only gave him a look. She didn’t like Soap taking too many risks for her.

He grinned at her, sidled over, and bumped her shoulder. “Stop your fretting. I can get away. Plus, how you going to do it without me?”

Sophronia felt a little giddy despite her worry. “Oh, very well! But this

is becoming quite the expedition."

It took them a week to plan their raid on the record room. Vieve agreed to lend Sophronia the obstructor with remarkably little fuss. She was involved in some new invention and it was taking up most of her time—even the temptation of a midnight record room break-in could not lure her away. She also told them where the room was located. "'Course I know. Whatcha take me for, an amateur? They keep records of inventions there, too." After that there was a good deal of arguing about who should go and who should stay behind.

Sophronia didn't tell anyone Soap was coming; she only said she had a way of getting inside once they found the place.

Dimity advocated most strongly. "I want to come! I haven't had any exciting excursions yet."

"It'll be either you or Sidheag; we have to keep the numbers down." *And Agatha clearly isn't interested.*

Dimity looked pleadingly at Sidheag, who, not unsurprisingly, shrugged.

Dimity took that as an affirmative and clapped her hands in excitement.

"You may have to tone down your sparkles, you know. The point is *not* to be seen."

Dimity, with great reluctance, removed all her jewelry and put on her darkest gown, a royal blue walking dress.

"Will I do?"

"Admirably."

Soap was waiting as arranged on the deck outside Sister Mattie's empty classroom, lurking among her potted plants. He materialized from darkness behind a tall foxglove. *Good as a poison in large doses or for trouble breathing in small amounts*, Sophronia remembered.

"Good evening, ladies."

"Good evening, Soap. All prepared?" He was looking cleaner than usual, and his clothing almost fit. *He put on his Sunday best for me.* Sophronia was chuffed.

"Of course. You have the obstructor?"

"I do, indeed." Sophronia showed him her wrist.

Dimity remained silent, her mouth a perfect *O* of amazement as she

looked at Soap.

“Dimity, this is Soap. Well, Phineas B. Crow is his proper name.”

Soap grinned his perfect grin and doffed his cap at the still-dumbstruck Dimity. “How-d’ye-do, miss?”

“This is Dimity Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

Dimity bobbed a curtsy and recovered her voice, fortunately remembering to keep it low. “How do you do, Mr. Soap?”

“Oh, just Soap will do, miss.”

Dimity looked up at him, eyes wide. “You know we have a stable lad just like you. You know, in color. Perhaps you know him, name’s Jim, he __”

“I’m loath to cut introductions short, but we really must get moving,” said Sophronia, mostly to forestall anything further Dimity might come up with.

The three of them turned and proceeded in a measured way toward the teachers’ section of the ship. They spent a good deal of time pausing to let the obstructor work its invisible magic, dashing around a frozen mechanical, and then going onward.

Fortunately, the record room was exactly where Vieve said it would be: on the upper floor of the front section of the airship.

Getting there was rather less easy than it might have been. Dimity was no climber, and she kept wobbling around and squeaking about the distance to the ground—far—and the difficulty in bridging gaps—impossible. Eventually they climbed a rickety set of steps that wound in a corkscrew around the outer hull from Professor Lefoux’s balcony to a small, cupboardlike door.

Directly above was the forward squeak deck, where Sophronia had stood on her first day and acquired Bumbersnoot. Below were the levels containing the teachers’ private quarters; below that, the massive boiler room. The forward section housed everything *important*, and the attic level was one of the only ones Sophronia hadn’t visited. Consequently, she was dying of curiosity.

Dimity signaled them to keep their voices down. “Professor Braithwope, remember? He’s still awake, and he’s only a level or two below us, with vampire-acute hearing.”

Wish she’d thought of that when she was squeaking, thought Sophronia.

They continued along in silence. The level was somewhat squashed. Even Sophronia felt cramped, and she was by far the littlest of the three. It was not rigged with gas parasol lighting. They had to feel their way along in the dark.

They found the room, conveniently labeled RECORD LIBRARY—CONTAINING RECORDS OF IMPORT in big gold letters.

There was a soldier mechanical directly outside the door. It spotted them approaching and whirred to life, puffing smoke out from below its headpiece in a huff of alarm. Before Sophronia could even raise the obstructor, the mechanical raised one cannonlike arm and shot at them.

Soap dove down on instinct. Sophronia and Dimity flinched.

They found themselves covered in a net of some spongy, sticky material, like tripe, that was nevertheless very strong. The mechanical advanced toward them, hissing menacingly.

I feel like a partridge wrapped in bacon, thought Sophronia. *Most unpleasant.* Sophronia couldn't raise her arm to point with the obstructor, as the netting held it firm at her side. "Dimity, can you reach your sewing scissors?"

"I can't move," peeped Dimity, and then she made a *puft* noise as some of the sticky netting got into her mouth.

"Soap?" Sophronia tried to look about to see the sootie.

"I'm better off than you are, miss. But it's a mite embarrassing."

Sophronia glanced down. In diving to avoid the blast, Soap had ended up partly shielded by the skirts of her dress. Only one side of his body was trapped to the floor by the netting; the other half was under her petticoats.

The mechanical was upon them, and had apparently been instructed to try to capture any intruder, but was confused to have caught three at once. It was making bewildered whirring noises and rocking side to side on its track as it sifted through its protocols for the correct approach.

"Do you have any sewing scissors?" Sophronia asked Soap.

"No, miss, but I have a knife."

"Can you get to it and try to free up my wrist?"

Soap squirmed, fluffing out petticoats as he wiggled his free arm. Dimity made a muffled squeak of alarm at this indignity to Sophronia's person. Soap managed the task barely, cutting away enough of the strands

to allow Sophronia to raise her arm and point it at the mechanical. Unfortunately, the strands were now stuck to his knife.

The soldier mechanical appeared to have reached a decision. It leaned back and brought up its other arm, this one spouting smoke.

“It’s going to burn us alive!” gasped Dimity.

Before the mechanical could do anything further, Sophronia hit it with the invisible blast from the obstructor. The mechanical froze, but they still had to extract themselves from the net. Soap continued to hack from below with his knife, using the hem of Sophronia’s gown to clean it as he did so. Sophronia managed to access her reticule with her free hand and pulled out her sewing scissors. She cut away at the netting around Dimity until she, too, could get to her scissors.

“This stuff is so sticky. I’m sure it’s food by nature. Should we be handling raw foodstuffs? My dress is entirely ruined, and even using it to wipe with isn’t very effective.” Dimity was not pleased.

Sophronia checked the tackiness of the net between two fingers. *I wonder if oil might work.* She fished some perfume oil out of her reticule—rose-scented. She cleaned her scissors as best she was able and then coated the blades with the oil. It worked a treat.

“Would you look at that?” Soap was impressed. Sophronia dropped the bottle down to him. He coated his knife, then handed the oil up to Dimity. Things went much faster after that, although they all ended up smelling like roses.

All the while they were working to get free, Sophronia had to pause to blast the mechanical with the obstructor. When the sticky stuff was finally gone, they could not push the huge, heavy soldier mechanical out of the way, for it was somehow locked down.

Soap couldn’t manage to pick the lock in the space of one obstructor blast. So Sophronia had to stand before the sentry and disable it with the obstructor every six seconds while Soap worked diligently behind it.

Sophronia worried the obstructor might run out or fade in its effectiveness. Vieve had not explained exactly how it worked, and Sophronia could hardly believe it would continue indefinitely, but it showed no signs of stopping.

Eventually Soap got the door open. Sophronia hit the mechanical with one last blast and they squeezed inside the room before the thing woke up

again. They closed the door firmly behind them.

Only to be faced with an entirely new problem.

The record room looked like a small factory or cotton mill—machines and conveyors and rotary belts ran along the walls and filled the corners of the room.

“Look up,” hissed Sophronia.

Dimity and Soap did.

Above them dangled the records. They were clipped to conveyers mounted on the ceiling, like an upside-down, dangling version of mechanical tracks. The records themselves looked like nothing so much as laundry hanging from a clothesline. They were far too high up to reach, and there seemed no way to know where any particular record was. There were hundreds there, if not thousands—it was a nightmare.

“There must be some method of search and recall,” Sophronia said, looking around desperately.

There were three desks in the room, each with a small leather seat, an oil lamp, and a writing pad. Each also boasted a large brass knob with a lever sticking out of the top. Around the base of the knob, and taking up a good deal of the desk space, was a circular piece of parchment paper with writing on it.

Soap went to one desk, Sophronia to another, and Dimity to the last. Each bent to light the oil lamp and examine the writing on the round parchment.

“Try not to touch anything; we are still all-over sticky,” warned Sophronia.

Even as she said it, a quill adhered itself to Dimity’s bosom as she leaned in. Dimity didn’t notice. She said, “Mine is labeled with locations.” She craned her neck to the side to read around the circle. “Cities, counties, a few districts, and even some wards. Here’s London. Here’s Devonshire.”

Sophronia looked at hers. “Mine looks like it’s skill sets. Knife, seduction, armored umbrella, flirtation. What’s yours, Soap?”

Soap was standing over his desk with his head down, not even looking at the paper.

They didn’t have much time. “What’s it *say*, Soap?”

Soap looked up, clearly embarrassed. “Sorry, miss, can’t tell.”

“Goodness me, why not? Is it something horrid and unladylike?” Soap

was proving, often, to be far more conscientious of Sophronia's dignity than Sophronia was.

Soap only shook his head.

Dimity said in a sympathetic tone, "You can't read, can you, Mr. Soap?"

"No, miss. Sorry, miss." His voice was almost a whisper.

Sophronia blinked. *Poor Soap! What a thing to go through life without books.* "Oh, right." She ran over. "It's the alphabet." She pointed, "See, *A, B, C, D*, and so forth."

Soap only backed slightly away, looking hugely embarrassed. Sophronia bumped up against his side, much in the manner he had done to her in the past, and gave him a little smile. This seemed to only embarrass him further. "Aw, miss."

"What do they mean?" asked Dimity.

Sophronia shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

She grabbed the lever on Soap's desk and pushed it toward *A*.

All around them, with what seemed to be a tremendous amount of noise, the machinery of the record room came to life. Steam hissed out from pistons and rotary mechanisms as they whirled up, thundering, shaking, and groaning. Above them the records moved on those tracks, shifting from one part of the room to another, parting and regrouping. They whizzed around one another, the parchment flapping and crackling. Finally a large cluster moved purposefully in Soap and Sophronia's direction, coming to a stop directly above the desk.

"Now what?" wondered Soap.

Sophronia searched around the desk for some other operational mechanism or switch.

"This is when I wish we had Vieve with us," she said, frowning. She returned to the original lever, and after tapping and picking at it, pressed down hard on the round brass nodule at the base.

With a loud clunk, the records above her dropped.

She and Soap both ducked out of the way, narrowly missing being whacked by dangling paperwork as the collection above the desk came flying straight down and stopped, hovering, in a manner undoubtedly convenient to whomever was seated at the desk.

Sophronia unclipped and examined one of the pieces of paper, mindful of any stickiness. She read bits aloud, in deference to Soap, and to the fact

that Dimity still stood at her desk some distance away.

"'Comtesse de Andeluquais, Henrietta, née Kipplewit,' it says at the top of the file." Below this was a sketch of a personable young woman, with written vital statistics such as hair color, eye color, social position, and fashion preferences. Then came a string of locations and dates, starting with what Sophronia assumed was a birthplace and ending with what must be the comtesse's current residency in France. Below that was written a list of particular skills, which in Henrietta's case appeared to be "Parasol manipulation, hairstyles for concealment, ballistics, quiet footsteps, fast waltz, and rice pudding."

There were a goodly number of additional papers covered in neat handwriting. Sophronia tried to sum up for her audience. "Reports on various assignments, I believe. Yes, here it says she infiltrated French diplomatic offices. And here is a report on her marriage to the comte." Sophronia looked over at Dimity. "You mean we are going to have to marry whomever the school chooses?"

Dimity was unconcerned. "Within reason. This is a finishing school, after all. That's what all finished girls do—marry well. Besides, how else would we infiltrate positions of power?"

Sophronia postponed any protestations for a later date and turned her attention to the issue at hand. She replaced Henrietta's paperwork and depressed the brass knob of the lever, and the records rose back up to the ceiling.

"Which desk had locations?"

Dimity pointed at hers.

Soap and Sophronia went over.

"We need a location close to my home. That's near Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire." Sophronia began reading the place names. "Aha, Swindon should do it." She grabbed the lever and pulled it.

The records shifted and whisked around, rearranging themselves until a cluster coalesced and came to hover above the desk. This time there was a much smaller number of records—three, to be precise. Sophronia depressed the nodule and the paperwork plummeted down.

They were all ready this time and didn't duck or flinch.

It was a moment's work to read through the names of the three women in Sophronia's area who had also once attended Mademoiselle Geraldine's.

Of the three, one was now dead, the second had lived there for only a brief time in 1847, and the third… well, the third was…

"Mrs. Barnaclegoose!" said Sophronia.

"I take it you know her?" asked Dimity.

"Yes, indeed."

"Then we've got what you came for, miss?" said Soap.

Sophronia desperately wanted to read the entire file on her mother's dear old friend and chronic teatime companion. She'd always thought Mrs. Barnaclegoose no more than a meddling busybody with stylish propensities at odds with her ever-increasing waistline. "Please, wait!"

"Now, miss, we'd best move. Them machineries make enough noise to spook a poltergeist, and we got us vampire hearing to worry over. Best get the records back the way they were to start and get out." He seemed very nervous. Sophronia wondered if it was all the paperwork.

"No point in trying to make the break-in invisible."

"No?" Dimity was confused.

"No. The place reeks of rose oil, and there is sticky netting all over the hallway. We are going to have to try to cast the blame on someone else. I'll simply put this lot back up and dial in something random. At least that'll throw them off the trail."

Sophronia depressed the nodule, and they watched as the three Swindon records rose up to the ceiling. Then she dashed over to the final desk and pushed the lever toward the "tea leaf encryption" skill set. A new cluster of papers came over to that desk. Instead of pushing them to ascend, Sophronia left them there. They snuffed out the oil lamps and made their way out of the record room.

They managed to blast and then sneak by the soldier mechanical, which was rocking back and forth in confusion. Something about having trapped an intruder and then suddenly having that intruder be multiples and then vanish had put it into a protocol loop. It was paralyzed by indecision and hadn't sounded the alarm. *Luck*, thought Sophronia. *Is that something an intelligencer should count on?*

They made their way back down through the ship, using the obstructor as needed and separating from Soap at Lady Linette's balcony.

"Thank you kindly for your help," said Sophronia, rather awkwardly formal.

“’Course, miss,” said Soap, coming in far too close and tucking a loose bit of Sophronia’s hair behind her ear before swinging himself back over the railing and clambering away.

Dimity gave Sophronia a long, suspicious look.

Sophronia pretended not to see and said, “Turn around. I’ll get your buttons.”

Dimity sputtered, “But we are outside! At night! On a balcony!”

“Yes, but sometimes decency must be sacrificed on the altar of not being found out by teachers because we smell of rose oil and are covered in sticky stuff! Now, please, Dimity.”

They helped each other to remove their outer gowns. Dimity threw hers over the edge rather sadly. “I did like that blue gown.”

“Let’s hope Captain Niall doesn’t find them.” Sophronia chucked hers after Dimity’s without much care. She’d grown to appreciate that she needed to learn to be fashionable, but that didn’t mean she had vested any emotional compassion into her existing clothing. “I’ll steal us some vinegar from the kitchen in the morning; we can soak our smalls in that. It should get out the smell.” She bit her lip, thinking. “And suet, for cleaning our scissors.”

Dimity looked faintly unwell at the idea. “So much for smelling like roses.”

Breaking, Burgling, and a Proper Breakfast

Despite the fact that Lady Linette must have discovered it, the infiltration of the record room was not announced at breakfast. No doubt this was to keep Mademoiselle Geraldine in the dark. The headmistress probably didn't even know there *was* a record room. However, there was certainly an aura of doom about the repast that subdued even Monique's machinations.

Nevertheless, Monique managed to corner Sophronia in the hallway later that day on their way to lessons with Lady Linette.

"I understand your sister has a coming-out ball soon. Pity your family can't see to a London Season. Or is there some additional urgency to the matter of your sister's entrée?"

Sophronia curled her lip. "At least Petunia is *getting* a coming-out. I understand you haven't been presented. And you are what, all of eighteen? Such a waste."

"Oh, don't you concern yourself with me. Mama plans a spectacular season as soon as I finish. And she won't have already spent the family fortune on an older sister."

"Why are we talking about this now?"

"Oh, did I forget to mention? I have an invitation."

"What!"

"Yes, indeed. I wrote to Daddy shortly after we first arrived at school. Daddy knows people."

How on earth did she get that message off the ship? Sophronia wondered. *I thought she was prevented. I missed something. What did I miss?*

"How did you…?" she started to ask; then she remembered. Monique's *friend.*

She has a teacher, or something like it, working with her, of course! They must have sent the message for her, from Bunson's. Perhaps I can somehow take advantage of this, follow her. "It's going to be a very interesting event," said Sophronia slyly. "Very interesting indeed."

Monique's face sharpened. "Are you meddling, little girl? I wouldn't meddle in things that don't concern you."

"Isn't that exactly what we are being trained to do?"

Monique stepped in close, and Sophronia felt a prick at her throat. Under cover of full sleeves and bonnet ribbons, the older girl pressed a very sharp metal hair stick into Sophronia's neck. "Accidents will happen."

Sophronia was not to be cowed. She jerked away. "So will discoveries," she hissed before moving swiftly on to Lady Linette's. Monique followed her. She was no longer worried for her family; Monique wouldn't tell anyone the hiding place. *She wants to retrieve the prototype herself. She wants to stay in control of the operation. That's what I'd want.*

The other girls were already seated. They were looking, Sophronia realized, far better than they had in September. Dimity's curls were more controlled. Preshea's expression was not so sour, and Agatha had a nice piece of lace about her neck. Even Sidheag had improved her posture. Sophronia wondered what changes had been wrought upon her own appearance.

Lady Linette entered a few minutes after Monique, almost late for her own class. She looked harried underneath her copious frills and layers of face paint. "Ladies, it has come to our attention that someone tampered with the record room last night. Have any of you information to impart?"

The girls all looked at one another.

Monique raised her hand. "Sophronia, Dimity, Sidheag, and Agatha have been very subversive lately."

Lady Linette turned blue eyes upon Monique. "Indeed, Miss Pelouse? Have you overheard anything concrete?"

"No, Lady Linette." Monique shifted in her seat.

Lady Linette turned her attention to Sophronia. “Have you ladies been plotting?” Sophronia had no idea why she should be selected as the representative of the group, but supposed it was a fair cop. They did, as a general rule, tend to be her schemes.

She said, “I’m attempting to get them invited to my sister’s ball. That’s why I keep trying to send a message home.”

“Of course you are. But not Miss Buss or Miss Pelouse?”

Sophronia shrugged. “Mumsy won’t let me ask *everyone*. I mean to say, what comes next—the entire school?”

Monique looked prim. “I already have an invitation. I don’t need Sophronia’s help.”

Dimity gave Sophronia a very worried look.

Sophronia remained impassive. “Oh, yes? I didn’t know you knew my sister.”

“Nor did I,” interjected Lady Linette. “Considering Miss Pelouse’s last sojourn into your abode was under false pretenses, she will have to plan her outfit carefully. And you ladies, do you think you are ready for a ball so soon in your careers?”

Sidheag shrugged. Dimity nodded enthusiastically. Agatha stared at her hands.

Lady Linette sighed audibly. “Nothing to do with the record room, then, ladies?” She directed the full focus of her attention on Sidheag, of all people. “Are you certain you didn’t see anything in particular?”

Sidheag looked at Sophronia with a slight air of contrition and shrugged. Sophronia frowned. *What does Sidheag have to feel guilty about?*

“Is anything missing from the record room?” asked Sophronia.

“A quill, but nothing else.” Lady Linette redirected the query to become a teaching session. “So what do we believe an infiltrator might have been after, ladies?”

“Information,” said Preshea promptly. “It is a record room.”

“Exactly, Miss Buss. Very good.”

“The culprit has to be someone already on board school grounds,” added Sophronia. “Unless infiltrators can get on and off without the mechanicals noticing.”

“Good, Sophronia.”

“That’s why you are interrogating the students.”

“Lady Linette.” Dimity straightened up. “Are the records of students kept in that room?”

Lady Linette nodded.

Sophronia, seeing where Dimity might be steering the conversation, said, “So the culprit wanted to see information, change information, or steal information. Which means a vested interest. Older student, perhaps, skilled enough to get in, with something at risk?”

Sophronia stopped herself there, not wanting to push her luck, and carefully didn’t look at Monique. Casting blame elsewhere was a classic misdirection tactic, but it had to be practiced with care. Particularly as it was Lady Linette who had explained the technique to her.

“So can Agatha, Sidheag, and Dimity come with me to my sister’s ball? Are they socially skilled enough for public exhibition?” Sophronia asked, hoping to change the subject now that she had planted a seed of suspicion.

“If their parents approve. You’ll have to wait until we exit the gray. Now, what to teach today? Oh, yes. *Posture*.”

That evening, Monique de Pelouse and a few of the older girls were taken in for questioning by Lady Linette, Professor Lefoux, and Professor Braithwope. A new rumor instantly sprang up that Monique was the one who had broken into the record room, supposedly to doctor her files over failing to finish.

“It’s a great rumor,” said Dimity proudly when they were safely back in their room, changing for dancing lessons. “Did you stash some of that rose perfume oil in her room?”

Sophronia grinned. “Of course.”

“Nice to get a little of our own back.” Dimity was busy rinsing out their now vinegar-scented underthings in the washbasin.

“How do you think Monique managed to get invited to my sister’s ball?”

Dimity said, “Connections. Your father belongs to some kind of gentlemen’s club, doesn’t he?”

“Don’t all fathers?” Sophronia finished with the bacon grease and the sewing scissors and fed the excess fat to Bumbersnoot, who belched black smoke appreciatively.

“A note from Monique to her darling papa right after we arrived here, and your mother is sending out one extra invitation to one bony blonde.”

“No, I mean how’d she get the note off the ship?”

“Oooh, good question. She had help?”

“She had help.”

“Who?”

“Now that, Dimity, is a really good question.” Sophronia wandered over to assist in wringing out the clothing. Dimity had clearly never even observed a washing day, let alone scrubbed clothing herself; she handled it so tentatively it was as though the fabric might be seized with a spirit of disapproval and administer a wet slap across her face.

“This could turn out to be a good thing,” Sophronia said.

“How so? Monique is sure to be better-dressed and have more dances than us.”

“She could lead us right to where she hid the prototype.”

“We’ll have to keep an eye on her the entire ball.”

“What an unpleasant thought. Still, there are four of us and only one of her.”

“With years’ more training.”

Sophronia made herself sound confident. “We did pretty well last night.”

Dimity nodded. “Although I thought in Lady Linette’s class that Sidheag might break.”

Sophronia nodded. “I know. It’s not like her. What do you think that was about?”

Dimity shook her head.

Sophronia slumped onto her bed. Or, to be more precise, she slumped down into her corset, which didn’t allow for very much slumping. Then, after a moment’s thought, she stood and left their room, heading for Sidheag and Agatha’s.

Sidheag wasn’t there, but Agatha let her in.

“Sophronia?”

“Could I have a little look out of your window, please, Agatha?”

“Well, um, if you like.”

Sophronia went over to the window. She had to stand on Sidheag’s bed to see out of it. It was one of those tiny portholes, like the ones on seafaring steamers.

“Sophronia, what are you doing on my bed?” came a sharp question.

“Good afternoon, Sidheag. Interesting how I can see right over to that outer balcony.”

“Is it interesting?”

“A balcony, mind you, that I like to use on occasion to get around. You, too, now that you’ve joined me on my climbing jaunts.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do.” Sophronia frowned at the tall Scotswoman. “Agatha, would you give us a moment of privacy?”

“You aren’t going to argue, are you? That’s what Papa always says before he yells at Mama. Please don’t argue. We’ve all been getting along so well.”

“Agatha!” said Sidheag sharply.

Agatha let herself out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Sophronia said, “I know you’re not happy here, Sidheag, but I never would have pegged you for a turncoat.”

Sidheag looked uncomfortable. “I thought you’d deny it and there would be an end to the matter.”

“I wasn’t trained up enough yet to know that denial was the best course of action.”

“So you got into trouble. Sorry about that.”

“Sorry? That’s all I’m allowed?”

“You just did exactly the same thing to Monique. Worse, because she didn’t actually do it.”

“She deserved it.”

“I thought at the time that *you* deserved it. Why should you go climbing out at all hours while the rest of us were trapped in our rooms?”

“I wish you’d admitted it was you earlier. Perhaps Monique isn’t as bad as I think.”

“Oh, she is.”

Sophronia sighed. She wasn’t really angry at Sidheag—more concerned about what it said about her new friend’s character.

Sidheag’s look went from militant and defensive to slightly apologetic. She sat on the other bed, facing Sophronia. Sidheag was no Dimity, to flop and lean affectionately on her shoulder.

“I didn’t want you to know it was me. I thought you’d hate me for it.”

“What did you do it for, then, Sidheag?”

“I thought it would show them what a bad fit I was for this school. A school like this ought to punish scandalmongers. Instead they acted

disappointed and put a note in my record. I did genuinely think you'd deny it, too. Then it would be your word against mine and nothing would come of it. I didna ken I'd grow to like you at all."

"You're not going to make it through, are you, Sidheag? I mean to say, you're tough enough, but—"

"I dinna care enough. I got home to worry over."

"Something's wrong with your pack?"

"Something." Sidheag clearly didn't want to relay the particulars.

"I take it you really don't want to come to my sister's ball?"

Sidheag nodded, perhaps a little too eagerly. "I should go home."

"Um," said a hesitant voice. The door behind them cracked open. Agatha had clearly been listening to the whole conversation. *At a school for espionage training*, thought Sophronia, *life can get very complicated.*

"Yes, Agatha?" she said primly.

"Could I not go, too, then? I mean to say, very kind of you to ask me and all, but I don't know as I'm ready, and if Sidheag isn't attending…" She trailed off hopefully.

"I'm certain you and Dimity can handle matters," Sidheag said, attempting to be positive.

Sophronia wasn't convinced, but it wasn't in her training to object. "Once an invitation has been declined, it does not do to force your request; it's as bad as a jilted lover pressing his suit," Mademoiselle Geraldine had said. So Sophronia left the room with a polite farewell.

"Sidheag and Agatha won't be coming with us to Petunia's ball," she said to Dimity upon returning to their room.

"Oh, why not?"

"They don't feel ready."

"Goodness, imagine passing up the opportunity to dress fancy and dance all night."

"Or, more precisely, dress fancy and follow Monique around all night."

Dimity said, "Just us two, then? This isn't going to be easy."

The end of the year barreled down upon them like flywaymen out of a clear blue sky. One week they were learning the last of handkerchief manipulation for fun and profit and having a special session on the

language of fans with an eye toward various holiday parties, and the next week the great propellers of the school had wound up and they were no longer drifting with the mists. They left their safe haven of gray and made haste to Swiffle-on-Exe.

The teachers were jumpy. No sooner had they drifted down and out of the cloud cover than on the horizon they could see the faint dots of airships tracking them. The school sped toward the town and the relative protection of Bunson and Lacroix's Boys' Polytechnique.

During the intervening two days, messages were dropped, presumably to Captain Niall and thence to the nearest post. Sophronia sent a carefully worded missive warning her family of possible flywaymen and asking them to uninvite Monique, both of which items she was tolerably certain they would ignore. She also informed them she was bringing Dimity with her.

Bunson's let out the same day as Mademoiselle Geraldine's, partly because of the system of shared information and partly for safety, Sophronia supposed. The flywaymen would hardly dare tangle with the defenses of an evil genius school, not to mention assembled parents of high rank and threatening aspect. Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality floated in low over the town and dropped anchor—which apparently meant lashing several mooring ropes to a copse of trees—a quarter of a mile away from the walls of Bunson's. It was midmorning and thus impossible to use Captain Niall and the glass platform for unloading. Sophronia suspected only very few knew about the rope ladders, which left her curious as to dignified disembarkation. *Will I get to see the stairs?*

She and the other debuts packed what few necessities they needed, knowing full wardrobes and shopping jaunts awaited them at home. They made their way to one of the main decks of the midsection of the ship alongside the other students. The deck soon became crowded with giggling girls, full skirts, and assorted fripperies, not to mention hatboxes, carpetbags, and parcels. Sophronia wormed her way to the front and watched with interest as the school came down so low as to allow a long, automated staircase to drop out from under its mid-deck. She bent herself double and nearly tumbled over the railing in an effort to see how it was managed. Sophronia spotted three sooties cranking it down and waved to them discreetly.

Carriages awaiting receipt of students were assembled on a sweeping brown patch of moor between the two schools. Some contained eager parents, but most were staff awaiting charges. There was also a large coach-and-four intended to take some dozen or so girls to the nearest train station.

Sophronia strained to see her own family crest—a hedgehog on the field of battle—on the side of a carriage. It was nowhere in sight, even with binoculars. Vieve had lent the binoculars to her on a semipermanent basis, a consolation prize from the young scamp upon taking back her obstructor. "To be sure," the girl had said, "I need it far more than you, stuck on this ship all on my lonesome for the next two weeks. Here, take these instead."

"Miss Temminnick, remove yourself from that indelicate position!" Lady Linette's voice resounded from the other side of the milling throng.

Sophronia shied back from the rail. With a puff of steam and a clang of machinery, that very rail folded away, leaving the students faced with a long, rather grand, staircase-meets-ladder contraption.

It was a precarious descent for the girls, particularly the debuts, having to navigate a bobbing and shifting staircase with proper poise and carpetbags, but they managed it without upset—even Agatha.

Only when she was safely on the ground and milling through the flamboyance of the waiting conveyances did Sophronia spot their transport.

"Over here, Miss Sophronia!" Her old chum Roger the stable lad stood and waved at her from the farm's pony and cart. It was terribly embarrassing; they would be traveling some fifty miles by cart. What if it rained?

Dimity, however, being a dear, sweet thing, said nothing disparaging. She declared in a shaky voice that it would be exhilarating to travel so far with an open top.

"You're Miss Dimity?" asked Roger. "I'm to collect a Miss Pelouse as well. She here?"

"Oh, must we? Couldn't you forget to, Roger, please?" asked Sophronia hopefully.

"More than my job's worth, miss. Herself gave explicit instructions."

At this juncture, Monique came up behind them and had histrionics. "Your mother sent us *that*? Guests at a ball, and we must travel all day in that!"

"You invited yourself, Monique. You might have ordered your own

transport. I suspect our carriage was needed for more important guests arriving from town at the station."

Monique sputtered and, after much fuss, allowed Roger to haul her into the cart, only to sit with her back ostentatiously presented to all.

Sophronia looked back up at the school through her binoculars. She could just make out, peeking out a bottom hatch of the forward section, two small faces, one black and the other that of a grubby child, accompanied by madly waving arms—Soap and Vieve seeing her off in their own inimitable way. Well aware that they probably could not distinguish her in the crowd, she nevertheless waved gamely back.

Sophronia looked beyond the ship. She was certain the specks were closer, and equally confident they represented flywaymen.

"Ready, miss?"

"By all means, Roger."

Dimity yelled, "Oh, wait, I forgot! Pillover. Can we bring him? I suspect Mama might have forgotten he needs a lift. She can be very absentminded when she's being evil."

Sophronia shrugged. "He's small. All right with you, Roger?"

Roger was game. "The missus said to make certain to collect all of you, not that I couldn't arrive with extras."

Dimity scanned the crowd for her brother. "Oh, where is the furuncle?"

"Look for a crowd of Pistons," suggested Sophronia.

"Oh, Pillover isn't a member. He's not dashing enough."

"Did I say I thought he might be? There!" Sophronia pointed to one side, where a group of boys stood with indolent posture and dark attitude. They were all dressed in browns and blacks, their hair was slicked back with too much pomade, and there were evening top hats on their heads—even though they were not yet presented and it was not yet teatime.

"Who do they think they are?" wondered Sophronia.

"Pistons, of course," replied Dimity.

Each boy wore a brass-colored ribbon about his hat and had a gear affixed to his waistcoat. One or two had some kind of decorative protective eyewear perched atop the brim as well. They all wore riding boots, although not a single saddle horse was to be found.

Sophronia said, in tones of mild shock, "Some of them look like they are wearing face paint."

“Kohl, about the eyes,” explained Dimity.

“Roger, head toward those boys over there, would you, please?”

“The pansies, miss?” said Roger.

“I wouldn’t let them hear you say that if I were you.”

Roger guided the pony toward the group in question with an ill-disguised look of contempt.

Pillover was, indeed, at their center. He was sitting atop a small trunk, shrouded in his oversized oil coat and battered bowler, reading a grubby book while the boys around him heckled him as though he were an emu at the zoo.

Their behavior, however, altered drastically the moment a cart full of girls drew up alongside.

“Lord Dingleproops?” said Dimity in a very snooty tone of voice. “What are you doing to my brother?”

A lanky young man with ginger hair and a less than aggressive chin doffed his hat at Dimity and said, with a cheeky smile, “Simply having a bit of fun, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

His eyes scanned the cart, arrested briefly by Sophronia—who looked at him directly, without flinching, in a most unladylike manner—and then moved on to Monique. Monique, in the style of all older girls when faced with younger boys, pretended the entire crowd of Pistons did not exist. Her attention remained fixed on the road ahead, a pose that emphasized her fine features and the slenderness of her neck.

Sophronia remembered what Pillover had said about them. *Nasty chaps.* One or two of them were, unfortunately, good-looking. She exchanged glances with a dark-haired, pale-faced boy with sullen lips and a petulant expression. He met her gaze and then looked away, restless, like a wild creature. Sophronia thought he was beautiful. His almost gawky quality reminded her of Captain Niall. Was he what the scandal papers might call *werewolf bait*? She said nothing to any of them. They had not been introduced. Instead she smiled her prettiest smile at Pillover.

What Sophronia did not know, and had yet to learn to control, was that her smile was rather more powerful than most. The face she saw in the mirror each morning was passingly pretty, if not terribly thrilling, but when she smiled with the full force of her personality behind it, she came over vibrant and striking. It was one of the reasons Monique disliked her so.

Pillover responded to the smile by closing his book and grinning back. His own dour expression, so obviously a mask for worry, briefly dissipated.

“Coming to the ball, Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott?”

“Ball? If you insist.” Pillover slid off his trunk, and Roger jumped down to help him load it into the cart.

“Ball?” said one of the Pistons with interest. “We like balls.”

Dimity gave them her best, most haughty look. “Yes, but are you certain they like you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sophronia whispered to her.

Pillover joined them, as confident in his new situation as if he had always expected to set off with his sister and two other girls in a farm cart.

“I don’t know,” replied Dimity as they drove away. “It sounded good at the time.”

Pillover pretended interest in his book until they were some ten minutes into the journey. “Where are we going?”

“My house,” replied Sophronia promptly.

“All righty, then.”

The trip began pleasantly enough. For the first few hours, Sophronia and Dimity chatted idly about what they might wear and how they might wear it. Pillover rolled his eyes and tried to behave in as dignified a manner as possible under the circumstances of girlish prattle and open-air transport. Monique ignored them. Roger paid attention to the road.

Sophronia thought she spotted a carriage following them, a high flyer. But it stayed well back and might have simply been utilizing the same byways.

The pleasantness was marred only by Bumbersnoot. Sophronia had tucked her mechanical pet, after some debate, into a hatbox for transport. She’d given him a small lump of coal for a travel snack and strict instructions not to stain the interior with smoke, or to singe it, or to catch it on fire. He did, as it turned out, all of these things, but that is not what disturbed the drive.

Sophronia was not aware that anything was amiss until she looked up in the midst of an entertaining debate with Dimity over the relative merits of pearls versus diamonds for a ball to find that Monique’s blue eyes were fixed in horror upon the luggage pile. Sophronia’s eyes followed the older girl’s gaze, coming to rest on her paisley hatbox, which was vibrating rather

more than any of the other luggage.

Sophronia put the hatbox next to her on the bench and put a hand firmly atop it.

Bumbersnoot, as it turned out, might have been trying to tell her something, for moments later, out from behind the hedgerows, they caught sight of an approaching airdinghy.

“Oh, goodness, look,” whispered Sophronia. “Flywaymen!”

Dimity let out a gasp.

Pillover closed his book with a snap. “What is it *now*?” Upon following their pointed fingers, he added, “Here we go again,” in tones of the deeply put-upon.

However, the flywaymen only kept pace with them for a long time, apparently content to watch from several yards away to determine whether they were worth approaching. Sophronia suspected the pony and cart of throwing them off. As a rule, such a contraption wasn’t worth attacking, given the general quality of the merchandise within. Unless, of course, they had determined that Monique was the one worth following in order to regain the prototype.

Roger, slumped and staring at the road before them, finally noticed they had company. He pulled the pony up.

“Don’t do that,” said Sophronia.

“Miss?”

“If they are going to leave us alone for now, then there is no point in delaying our travel. They will come at us if they want something. Otherwise, keep driving. I think we may have additional followers, as well.” She gestured at the carriage behind them.

“If you say so, miss.” Roger gave her a look that said he thought she had changed a good deal while she was away at school, and *not* for the better.

Sophronia turned back to Dimity and Pillover. “What kind of defenses do we have this time?”

Dimity canvassed her options. “Handkerchiefs, fans, two parasols, assorted hatboxes, hats, gloves, and jewelry—although I’d rather not use that.”

“Much better equipped than before.”

Dimity grinned. “And better able to make use of what we have.”

Pillover looked resigned. Then he reached inside the pocket of his

greatcoat and produced the Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification. “Still got this.”

Dimity glanced at Sophronia expectantly. “So what’s the plan?”

Sophronia looked through her binoculars at the airdinghy. “Three of them. Four of us. Five, if you count Monique. Unless the carriage following us is also flywaymen.”

“More likely Pistons,” said Pillover in a resigned tone of voice. “You told them about the ball. They like to go to events uninvited, put gin in the punch, and steal all the spoons. Stylish shenanigans like that.”

“Charming,” said Sophronia.

“Not Lord Dingleproops,” protested Dimity.

Pillover turned a disgusted look on his sister.

Monique had wrapped herself in a velvet shawl and was staring at the surrounding countryside, ignoring them, the Pistons, and the flywaymen. It seemed she was secure in her own scheme, confident in Sophronia’s ability to handle the situation, or simply uninterested.

Sophronia continued planning out loud. “Roger really has to keep his attention on the road. Too bad we haven’t any good projectiles.”

“They’ve not actually done anything against us yet. Remember what Lady Linette says; never engage first unless absolutely necessary,” protested Dimity.

“I should say they started it by attacking us last time,” said Sophronia. “Not to mention the two times they threatened the school.” Monique probably figured they were following her with no intention of engaging. An open confrontation had yielded up nothing substantial the first time around, after all. Sophronia, however, had no intention of letting either them or Monique dally along without interference.

The flywaymen continued to track them for another hour, giving Sophronia and Dimity ample opportunity to discuss defensive maneuvers, until a break in the hedgerows allowed the airdinghy a mooring point with easy access to the road. Evidently having decided that the cart was indeed worth their attention, now that they had spent the better part of the afternoon alongside it, the flywaymen lowered their airdinghy, lashed it to a tree, and leapt out to stand before them.

Conducting Oneself Properly at a Ball

The flywaymen approached with ready smiles and half-cocked pistols, in the manner of gentlemen highwaymen since the dawn of time, or at least the Middle Ages. They seemed, as before, interested mainly in dismembering luggage. This time, however, the girls would have none of it. As soon as the two flywaymen were close enough, Sophronia gave the signal, and she, Dimity, and Pillover threw hatboxes at them.

In the same instant, Roger whipped the poor pony into a trot and charged directly at the two surprised flywaymen, who jumped aside. Before they had a chance to turn around, Roger had the cart alongside their airdinghy. Sophronia and Dimity committed themselves in grand leaps out of the cart and into the gondola forthwith.

The flywaymen, no doubt planning a quick escape, had lashed their transport loosely to a small tree. Sophronia pulled the tail end of the rope. The airdinghy bobbed upward. Abandoning the notion of attacking the cart in favor of rescuing their own conveyance, the flywaymen dashed over, leapt upward, and attempted to grab on.

It was all to no avail. Perhaps as the result of carrying two girls and not two fully grown men, or perhaps by design, the airdinghy rapidly attained considerable height. Sophronia and Dimity peeked over the edge and down at their erstwhile pursuers, grinning. The flywaymen shot at them with their pistols. Sophronia and Dimity dove back into the basket, giggling.

Only then did they realize they had no idea how to steer the thing.

“Oh, dear, we might have used Pillover with all his book learning.”

Sophronia looked in confusion at the many cords dangling down from the four corner balloons, not to mention the sail lines in the middle and the levers for the propeller below.

“We might, but my brother hardly troubles himself with practical matters like balloons; he is such a philosopher. Embarrassing for everyone.” Dimity plucked at one of the cords.

They decided to start tugging on things and see what happened. Pulling on one rope made the airdinghy spin one way, and another caused it to bob alarmingly. One spiderweb linking system opened vents in all four of the balloons at the same time, at which they all began to collapse. Sophronia quickly let that rope go, and they stopped sinking.

They spent a half hour or so lurching about. The airdinghy bobbed up, down, and around in circles while Roger, Pillover, Monique, and the pony trundled merrily along the road, followed at a respectable distance by the Pistons. The flywaymen jumped around and shouted for a bit before leaving the road, stumbling and running through gorse and farmland, tracking the airdinghy over the countryside, and making the acquaintance of far too many hedgerows, and hopefully a thistle or two.

Finally, through some kind of fluke, Sophronia and Dimity managed to trap a wind with the sail and set a stately pace after the pony and cart, catching it up in a little less than an hour. At that point, Dimity dropped the mooring rope, which, after several botched efforts, Pillover managed to tie to the cart. Thus attached, they made good time, coasting happily all the way through Wootton Bassett and out the other side onto the Temminnick estates. They made quite a spectacle of themselves through the town, which was already in a tizzy over the upcoming ball. The pony, being of the long-suffering variety, hardly seemed to register that he was tugging a somewhat levitated cart.

Mrs. Temminnick looked up from a consultation with the gardener over which flowers to cut for the ball. She caught sight of Sophronia and Dimity disembarking, gracelessly, from the edge of the gondola into the cart. Airdinghies were not made for copious skirts. Her expression was that of a woman with multiple children who was no longer surprised by anything they did, up to and including arriving home from finishing school in an airdinghy.

“Have you learned nothing at that academy of yours?” she asked,

marching over. “What have you brought with you? An air balloon? Gracious, Sophronia, what next?”

“Mumsy, may I keep it? *Please?*” Sophronia jumped from the cart to the ground, swayed elegantly up to her mother, and executed a perfect curtsy. “Balloons always lighten up an event, don’t you feel? We could host small trips over the vegetable patch.”

“Oh, Sophronia, really! And who will operate it? This is intended to be a dignified celebration, not a carnival!” Mrs. Temminnick was distracted by the need to direct the greengrocer’s boy with his hamper to the staff entrance. “Frowbritcher will tell you what to do,” she explained to the lad. The baker’s boy, the cheesemonger’s boy, and the fruiterer’s boy were met with equal exasperation and stern guidance.

By the time Mrs. Temminnick returned her attention to her youngest daughter, Sophronia had chivvied Roger off, with pony, cart, *and* balloon. “It’ll be all right in the stable for now.”

Roger expressed his feeling that the size of the stable and the size of the airdinghy might be mutually exclusive.

“Put it in the barn if you must,” was Sophronia’s answer.

“Oh, goodness, child, how will it fit?” Mrs. Temminnick’s hands fluttered.

“Roger will manage.” Sophronia had to speak over the delighted cries of her two younger brothers, who had arrived on the scene and were far more excited about the balloon’s arrival than Sophronia’s return. “Mumsy, please make them stop touching it! They might hurt it.”

“Now, dear, don’t fuss.”

Sophronia hoped Roger could hold the course and that her brothers wouldn’t do any major damage. “Mumsy, I should very much like you to know my friends.”

Mrs. Temminnick paused in her frantic organizing, remembered her manners, and said, “Oh, dear me, yes.”

“This is Dimity Plumleigh-Teignmott and her brother, Pillover. That is Monique de Pelouse. I understand she is here at your behest, not mine.”

“Oh, *Miss Pelouse*, of course! Your father and my husband have some business dealings, I understand. You are most welcome. Sophronia, if you wouldn’t mind showing Miss Pelouse where she might freshen up? And, of course, I’m confident your little friends are delightful.”

Monique curtsied, keeping her bonnet low and her face well-shaded. It seemed to do the trick, for Sophronia's mother did not recognize her from her guise as headmistress. Mrs. Temminnick only smiled wanly, and then scurried off.

Sophronia jogged quickly after her. "Mumsy, did you get my warning?"

"Warning? What warning, dear? Oh, your odd little note? Yes, but dear, flywaymen are only a myth."

"Oh, Mumsy! Of course they aren't. Where do you think I got the airdinghy?"

"Well, dear, you know… somewhere." Mrs. Temminnick waved an airy hand in the air and consulted her list of pending deliveries. "Now, where is that confectioner's boy? I ordered three dozen sugared violets and two bags of candied citron, and they are absolutely vital to the success of this evening."

"But Mumsy, I think it might be even worse than that. There might be Picklemen involved."

Mrs. Temminnick let out a little gasp that was half laugh, half shock. "Now, Sophronia, why trouble your pretty head about such things? You let your father handle that. I'm quite certain none of them would dignify our paltry little country ball. Now, dear, really, I must get back to it. You run along with your little friends and get fancy."

Sophronia was not surprised by this dismissal. Frustrated, but not surprised. She would simply have to manage everything herself. She whirled and trotted back to where the others waited, Pillover and Dimity bracketing Monique with all the embarrassed menace of two small but dedicated poodles. Grabbing the hatbox that contained Bumbersnoot and corralling one of the footmen to help with the rest of the luggage, Sophronia led the way up to the top-floor nursery, a room that she knew from experience had no escape route. Nevertheless, she set Pillover to guard the hallway while all three girls together, despite Monique's protests, washed and changed for the ball.

Sophronia was in a quandary over the matter of her attire. In the few months she'd been gone, she'd outgrown much of her previous finery—what little there was of it. She was finding herself not necessarily more interested in a proper ball gown so much as understanding the usefulness inherent in fitting in to a social event—particularly if there were prototypes

on the loose. Leaving Monique under the Plumleigh-Teignmotts' watch, she went to find her sisters.

She located Petunia, her older sisters having not yet arrived.

Petunia was in heaven. If heaven were to be defined as a pink tulle ball gown resplendent with bows and frills, along with giggling bosom companions. She was not pleased to see her troublesome youngest sister.

"Sophronia, you're back?"

"Mumsy said I might be."

Petunia looked her over critically. "You don't seem *finished*."

Sophronia produced one of her newly acquired curtsies. "I assure you, I have many of the necessary requirements." Looking up, she said with no hint of mockery, "You look lovely, Petunia." In truth, her sister looked rather like a strawberry meringue, but Sophronia was determined to apply her education as much as possible. Petunia was merely a test subject.

Petunia and her dear friends, all alike in ringlets and ribbons, tried not to be impressed.

"Well, in that case, nice to have you home again."

"Petunia, Mumsy neglected to realize I was still growing. May I borrow a dress?"

Petunia was not so hard-hearted a sister as all that. "Of course you may. One of mine from last season should do you well enough. You might have to stuff your corset. Now, wait a moment, let me look at you… perhaps not. You *have* grown!"

Petunia rifled through her wardrobe, emerging with a blue dress, wide of skirt and flimsy of material, with a great deal of white lace trim.

"Thank you very much, Petunia!" Sophronia dashed off, leaving Petunia a little bemused by the changes wrought in her sister, until she was once again distracted by the excitement of her ball and the importance of applying only the barest hint of tint to her cheeks.

Sophronia returned to the nursery. Monique stewed in a corner, wearing an elegant gown of pale gold, and Dimity was explaining the relative merits of accessories to her uninterested brother.

"Oh, what a beautiful gown," exclaimed Dimity, who was rather fond of a big fluff of skirts. Her own gown for the evening was of a royal purple—a color entirely unsuitable to a girl of her age—not to mention the great swathe of pearls about her neck.

Monique said, as if she could not help herself, “It’s last season!”

Sophronia nodded. “I know, but it’s the best I could do. Mumsy forgot to order me one. Truth be told, I don’t think she expected me to actually put in an appearance. This will do.”

“Imagine going to one’s first ball in a borrowed dress from *last season*!” Monique shook her head at the travesty of the very idea.

Sophronia climbed into the dress, the sting of its outdated status somewhat mitigated by the fact that it fit her beautifully. Dimity buttoned up the back. After due consideration, Sophronia decided Bumbersnoot would be more of a help than a hindrance and picked him up.

“You can’t carry a mechanimal as an accessory!” hissed Dimity.

Which gave Sophronia an idea. She wrapped Bumbersnoot’s sausagelike body in a velvet scarf and tied it with a lace tuck so only his little head, feet, and tick-tock tail were peeking out. She wrapped each foot in lace and tied them with a bow. She then attached another length of lace to his neck and his tail, turning him into a dog-shaped reticule with a brass head.

“Oh, marvelous! That looks so outrageously modish it’s practically Italian!” said Dimity.

Sophronia slung Bumbersnoot over one shoulder and instructed him not to squirm, belch steam, or deposit any ash for the next three hours. Bumbersnoot wagged his tail very slowly, as if he understood the gravity of the situation.

The girls and Pillover, who had produced from somewhere a suit that actually fit, stuck close to Monique. They ate a light meal in the front parlor, out of the way of preparations, and sat drinking tea while the sun set and the guests began to arrive. No one was inclined to go anywhere until Monique did. And Monique would not join any party until it was well under way. Nothing was worse than being made available too early at a ball! Finally, she stood, and with a rustle, so did Dimity, Sophronia, and Pillover.

Pillover, although a good deal shorter than she, nevertheless offered his arm gallantly to Sophronia, who took it solemnly. He escorted her in first with all the dignity of an undertaker. Then came Monique de Pelouse, followed by Dimity. Dimity had her eyes narrowed and was clearly struggling to focus on Monique. She was about to enter a ballroom certain to contain much in the way of distracting fashion and other tempting sparkly bits.

Pillover and Sophronia were not announced. Monique was, and all eyes turned to her in interest as she glided in. No one was disappointed—she looked a peach. She quite outshone poor Petunia. Gentlemen descended in pursuit of her dance card, and Petunia's eyes filled with tears. Dimity skirted in after, also unannounced, and joined her brother and Sophronia. The three lurked about the fringes of the group of male sycophants now surrounding their nemesis.

When Monique danced, they danced with one another. They were well aware it was indecorous to dance with one's brother—or one's friend's brother, for that matter—at a ball. Dimity blushed furiously and dragged her feet. But Sophronia fell into her new training easily and found it no hardship to sacrifice dignity to the thrill of the hunt. When Monique sipped punch, Sophronia sipped punch and mimed inane conversation with Dimity. Dimity got distracted by jewelry. Pillover found his way to the nibbles far too often. Sophronia thought only of Monique and her admirers, quite unaware of those few young men who tentatively approached her and Dimity. Dimity was vivacious in her cheerful, roundly pleasing way—all bright smiles and colors. Sophronia's mousiness had somehow been tinted by finishing school with an air of mystery and quiet confidence. She was also carrying the most remarkable dog-shaped reticule, which some said was certain to become the very height of fashion next summer.

One young man, a ginger-haired lordling with an unrepresentative chin, turned away without much disappointment when it became clear Dimity was more focused on the pretty blonde girl than she ever would be on him. Another, a dark-haired, pale-faced boy with a petulant expression, spent a good deal of time courting the edges of Sophronia's notice, trying to look as though he didn't care that her attention was focused elsewhere.

Sophronia did notice him eventually, while still keeping Monique firmly fixed in her peripheral vision. "Dimity, I believe Pillover is correct. My sister's party has indeed been invaded by Pistons. I've seen two so far."

"Oh, dear me, is Lord Dingleproops among them?"

Sophronia gestured with her head at the table of comestibles. At the same time, the dark-haired boy slipped up to Sophronia's side and grabbed her hand.

"Dance?"

Sophronia was entirely startled both by the overtness of the approach

and the sudden appearance of the boy so close to her. She inadvertently allowed herself to be drawn into a quadrille with a young man, a *Piston*, to whom she had not been introduced! So many breaches in etiquette all at once! Sophronia was shocked at herself. That said, it was a testament to Mademoiselle Geraldine's training that she executed the quadrille steps perfectly without any thought at all—half her attention on her sullen partner, and the other half on Monique.

Then, suddenly, her focus was diverted by a hullabaloo. Pillover seemed to be trying to stop Lord Dingleproops from pouring a flask of some liquid into the punch bowl. Her dance partner saw Sophronia looking and made to direct her attention back to the quadrille. Sophronia narrowed her eyes at him and left the set. He probably didn't deserve such a cut direct, but something was afoot.

In the same instant, Monique made a break for it.

"'Ware!" Sophronia hissed, grabbing Dimity's arm. She was about to follow when another observation froze her in her tracks for a split second. Lurking in the shadows behind the scuffle was an older gentleman, perfectly dressed in evening garb, wearing a stovepipe hat with a green ribbon tied about it.

Their eyes met. Sophronia flinched and turned quickly to Dimity. "You're going to need to stay here. Keep an eye on that man, there. See him?"

Dimity gasped. "The Pickleman?"

"Yes. Monique is mine."

"Right!" Dimity nodded once and threw back her shoulders, edging toward the fracas at the punch bowl for cover.

Sophronia took off after Monique, who had slipped gracefully away from her crowd of admirers on the arm of an impressive gentleman and out into the back garden. Sophronia followed the couple as quietly as possible, at a distance, taking a lesser-used gardener's path between two rows of rhododendrons. The skirts of her wide dress brushed softly against the bushes, but her footsteps were silent. She walked carefully, toe to heel, in her kid dancing slippers, just as Lady Linette had instructed. The dirt path was far quieter than the dry straw on which they had been forced to practice.

Monique and her escort made their way along the brick walk and

through a copse of trees to a birdbath at the center of a wisteria-covered gazebo surrounded by huge lilac bushes. It was the sort of birdbath that cranked into motion, spinning a tiny wheel that raised and lowered a little flock of automated birds for when the real ones were otherwise occupied. It was motionless at the moment.

"Very well, Miss Pelouse. Westminster received your message. You have the merchandise?" said the gentleman after a moment of standing in silence.

Westminster? Is Monique working for parliament? Sophronia inched in closer, using the lilacs for cover and tucking her copious blue skirts in about her in an effort to remain invisible.

The gentleman was a remarkably good-looking chap—well-dressed, well-coiffed, and well-suited. Sophronia's mind instantly went to her lessons with Professor Braithwope. Did she detect the vampire touch? Was he dapper enough? There were no hives near her house, not so far as her parents had ever said, and he didn't appear to have fangs. She assessed his attire again. *Simply a very well-dressed government representative, or a drone?*

Looking furtively around, Monique pulled her gloves off, then tipped the brass birdbath over with her boot and reached inside the hollow of the pedestal to remove a brown paper parcel. It was about the size of her fist, very innocuous-looking, and tied with string.

She popped it into her reticule and straightened, brushing her hands together before pulling her gloves back on. With a self-satisfied smile she turned, removed the reticule from its waist hook, and held it up, dangling, just outside of the gentleman's reach.

"My payment, if you would be so kind?"

The dandy held up a small purse. "As agreed, minus a fee for the inconvenience of several months' delay."

Monique's lip curled. "How much of a fee?"

"Now, there, Miss Pelouse, a lady never discusses money outright."

Monique, still holding the reticule with the prototype, began backing away.

A gentleman in a top hat wound with green ribbon emerged from the shadows before she could go very far. "Good evening, Miss Pelouse. I believe you have something that belongs to me?"

Monique whirled to face this new threat. "I believe not."

“Ah, better to say that I believe you have something I *want*.” The Pickleman tipped his hat at the dandy. “Westminster is here? I should have guessed.”

The man tilted his head back. “Your grace.” In the same movement he pulled out a small gun, which he pointed in turn from Monique to the Pickleman. “Give it to me, Miss Pelouse. Now.”

Sophronia watched, wide-eyed. Her attention was focused on the prototype, which now dangled from Monique’s hand. *The key is to try to sneak it away while the others are distracted and get it back into the safety of the crowded ballroom. Clearly no one wants a public scene—not the Pickleman, not Monique, and not the man from Westminster.*

The Pickleman raised a whistle to his lips and blew it sharply. At Sophronia’s waist, Bumbersnoot the reticule woke up and began thrashing about, hissing steam, his little legs churning and catching in the skirt of her gown. As he was suspended from a lace strap, he could go nowhere, but he did make an awful noise and a terrible fuss.

Luckily, he wasn’t the only one. Something much bigger and much louder was causing even more of a racket. A hissing, clanking, crashing sound commenced as some large mechanical object made its way through the shrubs, destroying Mrs. Temminnick’s garden. It broke through the lilacs behind the Pickleman, careening into one side of the gazebo.

It was a huge mechanimal, shaped like a bulldog and as tall as man. It belched smoke out its ears; its four stubby legs were as big as birch trees; its mouth was a wide-open cavern of flame. Unlike Bumbersnoot, this mechanimal was not made to transport, only to destroy.

The Pickleman held a small object in one hand that he was threatening to throw at Monique. She now faced the mechanimal on one side and the dandy with the gun on the other.

Assuming her nemesis was well distracted, Sophronia edged her way around through the lilacs to get behind the girl. Bumbersnoot quieted once the noise from the whistle faded. Suddenly, the lilac bush in front of Sophronia rustled all on its own. She only just managed to swallow down a shriek of surprise.

Dimity popped up.

“Where’s Pillover?” Sophronia whispered, the noise of the massive mechanimal providing some cover.

“Dealing with Pistons. He said he would tie them up right and tidy as a cravat.” Dimity did not sound optimistic. “Oh, my, what’s that?”

“Monique, an angry Pickleman, a dandy from the government, I think, and a very big mechanimal.”

She could see Dimity pale, even though it was nighttime. “I thought they weren’t supposed to build them big. And it’s not on tracks. Is that legal?”

“I’m thinking very little of any of this is legal.” Sophronia considered their options. “We need a distraction. Could you and Pillover get the Pistons to come outside, cause a kerfuffle? It seems a particular speciality of theirs.”

Dimity wrinkled her nose. “Must we? I hate kerfuffles.”

“Best solution I’ve got on short notice. And please bring me one of those pies we saw the cheesemonger deliver this morning. You remember the ones, wrapped in brown paper? I know Mumsy didn’t allow all of them out for the party. She loves cheese pies and would have kept some in reserve.”

“If you think it best.” Without further argument, Dimity crept back to the house.

Sophronia turned back to the conversation before her.

“Instead, I offer you… your life,” the Pickleman was saying melodramatically to Monique.

Monique was not impressed, even trapped as she was between a gun and a mechanimal. “Throw in an engagement to your oldest son and we have a bargain.”

The dandy did not like that Monique was negotiating with the Pickleman. “Now, now, Miss Pelouse! We had an agreement.” He pulled back the hammer of his pistol.

The Pickleman laughed. “Not that you wouldn’t make an admirable wife to the boy—appropriately cunning, and well-trained, I’m sure, but no.” He rolled the object in his hand threateningly. Sophronia suspected it was like Professor Braithwope’s crossbow—whomever he threw it at, the mechanimal would attack.

“Come back here, you little worm!” There came a sharp yell and a series of yodels and cries. Pillover, flask in hand, came bumbling through the garden on chubby, rapidly churning legs and stumbled directly into the middle of the lilac dell that housed the Pickleman, Monique, the dandy, and

the mechanimal.

Dimity reappeared at Sophronia's elbow, panting, and handed her a cheese pie wrapped in brown paper.

"Thank you," said Sophronia politely.

Dashing after Pillover came Lord Dingleproops, the dark-haired boy who'd danced the quadrille with Sophronia, and two other Pistons, all looking annoyed, yet thrilled by the chase. Lord Dingleproops grabbed Pillover and began pelting him about the chops. Pillover instantly dropped to the ground in the middle of the gazebo and curled into a ball around the flask, like a grub. The dandy swiveled his gun around to point it at them instead of Monique. The Pickleman looked like he wanted to turn the mechanimal loose on the boys.

Sophronia said, "On my mark, you get the flask from Pillover. Try to pour it onto that mechanimal. I'm going after the prototype."

Dimity let out a little huff of anxiety, but nodded.

Sophronia kilted up her skirts. "Mark!"

Dimity dove for her brother, swirling out from the bushes with a trilling war cry. She went in and down, startling the attacking Pistons with the fluffy presence of a *female*.

Sophronia rushed Monique. "Oh, Monique, you poor thing, are these men behaving ungentlemanly toward you? Should you be out in the garden unchaperoned with all this roughhousing? Let me help you back inside. You're missing the better part of the ball."

Sophronia pretended to trip as she rounded the tussling boys. She lurched to one side, knocking the gun from the surprised dandy's grasp. "Oh, dear, pardon me, sir. Whoop—oh!" In the same movement she spun, simulating a continued stumble—Lady Linette would have been proud.

She blundered against Monique. With one hand she reached out and tore down the front of the older girl's dress, popping the decorative buttons and making certain to expose plenty of undergarments. "It is a certain truth," Mademoiselle Geraldine had said, gesturing at her own heaving cleavage illustratively, "that a lady's attention dwells overmuch upon the state, condition, and sanctity of her own assets."

Monique shrieked, clapping both hands to her exposed corset, and dropped her reticule.

Sophronia continued to the ground, rolling both her upper body and the

reticule underneath Monique’s full skirts. Under cover of those copious petticoats, she slipped the prototype out of the reticule. In almost the same movement, she replaced it with the wrapped cheese pie Dimity had handed her only moments before.

Monique kicked at her viciously, but Sophronia was already rolling away, her borrowed ball gown mitigating the force of the blow. She emerged in time to see Dimity wrest the flask free from Pillover and the Pistons and pour its contents over the head of the massive mechanimal bulldog.

Monique bent and retrieved her reticule triumphantly and turned to run, no doubt thinking to take advantage of the chaos. The Pickleman, not as distracted as the others, hurled his target blob at her fleeing form. The mechanimal roared to life and charged Monique. Acceleration required the creature to send new power to his limbs from the internal boiler. All it took was one excess spark for Sophronia’s plan to work. The contents of the flask were, as she had guessed, alcoholic, and thus highly flammable.

The mechanimal caught fire; so, too, did one of Mrs. Temminnick’s lilac bushes, part of the gazebo, and the hem of Monique’s gown as the creature blundered after her. Monique dropped to the path and rolled around to put out the flames, at the same time stripping off what remained of her overdress. The target must have adhered to that, for now that she had squirmed out of her gold gown, the mechanimal began savaging it to smithereens with sharp, superheated teeth. The dandy and the Pickleman came running up.

The Pistons were partly distracted by this short but excitingly fiery chase, and partly distracted by a new threat in the form of a small but enraged Dimity. Dimity, bless her heart, was reciting one of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s longest lectures on proper behavior at a dance, finger shaking in autocratic fury, Lord Dingleproops notwithstanding.

Still seated on the ground, Sophronia fed Bumbersnoot the prototype parcel, trusting that it was not actually combustible, but figuring it was better destroyed than in the wrong hands, regardless. Bumbersnoot immolated the paper and the string and swallowed the contents whole. He emitted a puff of steam and donned a contemplative look. There was crystalline clanking inside his metal belly cavity. Fortunately, there was still so much noise that no one heard it.

Sophronia stood, adjusting her Bumbersnoot reticule slightly. No one noticed her. The Pistons were shouting and tussling with Pillover, who in turn was squealing loudly while Dimity yelled at them all to get away because the gazebo really was going up in flames and could come tumbling down on them at any moment. A little ways off, Monique lay in the path, half undressed and screaming as the stomping, flaming mechanimal moved ever closer to her. The great beast had one foot placed firmly on her petticoats, effectively immobilizing her. The Pickleman was slapping at his mechanimal with his overcoat to put it out. The dandy was standing over Monique, waving his gun around and instructing her to hand over the prototype, which Monique thought was still in her reticule, which she was clutching firmly to her breast.

“Good dogs,” said Sophronia softly to both mechanimals.

Getting the prototype to safety was of paramount importance. The dandy or the Pickleman could get hold of Monique’s reticule at any moment and discover it contained no prototype valve at all, but a cheese pie.

From among the tussling Pistons, the young man with the pale face paused indolently and looked over at Sophronia. He tossed a lock of dark hair out of one eye with a casual sway of his head. One corner of his mouth twisted up into a heartbreakingly sweet smile. *Rake in training*, decided Sophronia.

She shook her head at him once and then took off toward the house at a dead run. “Dimity, Pillover, scatter!” she yelled as she did so, using Soap’s favorite term.

Dimity and Pillover understood the instruction. Pillover managed to extract himself with a quick twist, and Dimity left off her yelled lecture. Sophronia could hear them panting behind her.

She attained the relative safety of the crowded dance floor feeling as though she had been through a small war. No one noticed her entrance at all. Dimity and Pillover followed shortly after. The Pistons did not. They had taken Dimity’s lecture to heart, or were still cavorting with the burning gazebo, or had realized they had stumbled upon something more dire than their normal uninvited antics and escaped to their carriage.

Sophronia, Dimity, and Pillover looked as if they had been rolling about on the ground in their fine dress—which they had. A quick smoothing of one another’s hair, repairs to smudged faces with handkerchiefs, and

brushing off of dirt, and they were mostly respectable. Sophronia was merely once more the Sophronia of *before* finishing school—scruffy youngest daughter, a mild embarrassment. Her appearance resulted in nothing more than a few disparaging glances from some of the older matrons present.

That was partly because Petunia, belle of the ball, was having hysterics in one corner of the room. Apparently, someone had done something to discolor her punch. Once a cheerful pink, it was now swamp-grass green. Mrs. Temminnick was ordering up barley water and lemonade, which Petunia felt were summer beverages and thus embarrassingly out of season. Why could they not have mulled wine?

Dimity, Sophronia, and Pillover snuck through the crowd, looking for Mrs. Barnaclegoose. Well, Sophronia looked; the other two, who had never met that good lady, were busy saying, “Is that her? Is that her?” in a slightly annoying way.

Petunia’s hysterics were just winding down when Monique de Pelouse came dashing into the ballroom. Her appearance caused more of a stir than Sophronia’s had. All attention drifted off of Petunia and the problematic punch to this new exhibition.

Miss Pelouse was *decidedly* indecent—her fine gold dress was entirely gone, and she stood in a towering rage, wearing nothing but singed and torn undergarments.

Behind her Sophronia swore she could see the dandy and the Pickleman skulking in the garden shadows. If they had the right kind of mind, they would suspect any one of the Pistons of absconding with the prototype. That is, if they believed it had been stolen from Monique and she wasn’t still hiding it about her person.

Monique, however, had a pretty good idea of who would have pinched the prototype. Her hair was wild, her eyes were flashing, and her tattered underskirts floated around her. She looked like a glorious avenging goddess from some ancient erotic myth. She marched through the room, in a vicious temper, and straight into a halfhearted waltz.

Sophronia pretended not to notice her. The crowd parted. *Simply behave as though nothing is out of the ordinary*, she told herself. *I do this every day, hide extremely desirable inventions in my fake reticule.*

Monique stood, arms akimbo, some six or seven paces away from

Sophronia, and letting forth a scream of unadulterated anger, she hurled a cheese pie at Sophronia's head.

Petunia Temminnick's coming-out ball was pronounced a resounding success by all in attendance. There had been highly intoxicating punch, a variety of dances, good music, and intermission entertainment. No one knew why the beautiful Miss Pelouse had stripped, rolled about in the garden, and then chucked a cheese pie at the youngest Temminnick girl before being taken away in floods of tears, but it was surely the highlight of a most enjoyable evening.

Sophronia, covered in pie, was removed from the room by her mother, only to deflect Mrs. Temminnick's embarrassed clucking with a very odd request.

"Mumsy," she said, "it is imperative that I speak with Mrs. Barnaclegoose *immediately*. I have been looking for her all evening. Is she not in attendance?"

Mrs. Temminnick was not having a pleasant night. Her eldest daughter was overset, the beverages were in chaos, and this was all capped off with indecency and the inexplicable flinging of pies. She was in no mood to give consequence to Sophronia's irrational desires.

"Oh, really, Sophronia, must you be so difficult?"

"I'm afraid I must. She is here, isn't she?"

Mrs. Temminnick waved her hand about arbitrarily. "I believe she retreated to the front parlor. If only I could do the same. Go on, if you must." She looked wistful for a moment. Then she drifted away to find Frowbritcher so he could deal with the cheese pie remnants.

Sophronia made her way to the parlor and was delighted to find Mrs. Barnaclegoose alone, sipping tea and watching the arrivals and departures out the front window. She looked up as Sophronia entered.

"Miss Sophronia? What has happened to you? You are covered in cheese and onions. Have you learned nothing at finishing school?"

"I have learned a great deal, as a matter of course."

"Clearly not."

"And some of it was about you."

"Pardon me, young lady!"

“We don’t have time for avoidance with niceties, Mrs. Barnaclegoose. Although I do remember the lesson. Any moment now Monique will have *noticed* I’m gone. Or the Pickleman. Or the man from Westminster. We must keep *your* disguise intact.”

She sidled up to the portly woman. This evening Mrs. Barnaclegoose wore a tambour net gown of midnight black embroidered with pink roses along the various ruffles of the skirt and a quantity of pink fringe about the neck and sleeves. It was the kind of gown to be favored by a young and not very pious widow half Mrs. Barnaclegoose’s age. *She disguises herself with the ridiculous*, realized Sophronia. *Nice tactic.*

Mrs. Barnaclegoose looked at Sophronia as though she were wearing Scottish tartan while dancing an Irish jig.

Sophronia handed her the Bumbersnoot reticule. “Take this mechanimal, please. I have just fed him the you-know-what that everyone wants. He should, um, emit it shortly. It would behoove you to be well away from these premises when that happens. Then you must give it to either Lady Linette or the necessary authorities. I trust your discretion. Be careful; simply gobs of flywaymen, a Pickleman, and possibly the government or the vampires are all after it.”

Mrs. Barnaclegoose’s eyes narrowed. “I have no idea, young miss, what you are on about.”

“No, I suppose you might not. Nevertheless, this is a matter of finishing in the *other* way.”

“Ah.” Mrs. Barnaclegoose gave Sophronia a once-over. “I take it the cheese is the result of your procurement of this object?”

“Exactly so.”

“So you *are* learning something.” The woman was beginning to look less affronted and more pleased with herself.

“Oh, Mrs. Barnaclegoose, I am learning many things. Thank you for recommending me to the academy.”

“Ah, good, well. I thought you would be an admirable fit.” Mrs. Barnaclegoose looked like she might actually be blushing with pleasure.

“You are very wise, Mrs. Barnaclegoose.” *How have I never noticed she only required praise to find me acceptable?* wondered Sophronia, not quite realizing that this, too, was a mark of her new education. Many was the lady whose belief in another’s sound judgment was based solely upon that other

judging *her* favorably.

The older woman actually smiled at her.

Sophronia smiled the smile Lady Linette called “winning” and nodded to the reticule, which Mrs. Barnaclegoose had now taken and tucked under the edge of her copious skirts.

“My dear girl, I have it all entirely under control.”

Sophronia curtsied.

Mrs. Barnaclegoose approved the maneuver. “Such an excellent education.”

Sophronia curtsied again and then hurriedly made her way from the room, dashing upstairs to change her dress. It was as good an excuse as any to be absent from the ball for a short length of time.

She confiscated another one of her sister’s dresses, figuring Petunia’s evening was ruined regardless, and did it up as best as she was able without a maid, finally throwing on a shawl to cover the missed buttons at the back. It was a sage-green confection with fuchsia trim, most ill-suited to her complexion, but it would have to do.

The remainder of the evening was rather anticlimactic. Neither Pickleman, government dandy, nor Pistons returned. Sophronia hoped she had set things up so that the two men would chase after the Pistons, and the Pistons, being wild young men out for a night of tomfoolery, would lead them on a merry chase. Mrs. Barnaclegoose made her excuses at a respectably early hour for a respectable lady, and no one—not even Dimity, who was looking—noticed that she had a mechanical sausage dog for a handbag. Petunia danced the last of the ball away with a succession of appropriate young men. Pillover danced with Sophronia and Dimity with gravitas, if not skill, although he was a head shorter at the very least. The lemonade was pronounced superior to the punch, and the cheese pie was not at all missed.

Monique de Pelouse spent the rest of the event in the best guest bedroom and insisted on a carriage being called for her in the wee hours of the morning. In the interest of his business concerns, a very worried Mr. Temminnick lent her his personal conveyance to catch the morning express train to London.

Upon discovering the burned-down gazebo and crushed lilac bushes,

Mrs. Temminnick declared categorically that her youngest daughter must be responsible and thus still needed the benefits of finishing school and was not at all ready to return home. She noticed that Sophronia had emerged a politer, more mannered, and stylish young lady, but she had also emerged covered in cheese pie. Clearly Mademoiselle Geraldine's still had work to do, and as they were willing to keep Sophronia on, she was most certainly willing to be parted from her youngest daughter.

Sophronia pretended to be most upset at the idea of continued exile, although she was secretly delighted. She packed with far greater care this time around, including her riding crop, three steel lug bolts, and a small dissection knife among the hand-me-down dresses her mother insisted on including and Dimity insisted they could easily "make over." Sophronia considered the airdinghy; there was no way to keep it at school, although she supposed the sooties might find one. Instead, she and Dimity deflated the balloons, lowered the sail, and convinced the builders to incorporate the remaining gondola and mast as a decorative element on the roof of the new gazebo. It disappeared seamlessly there, hidden in plain sight.

Dimity and Pillover stayed the length of the winter holidays. There were so many Temminnick children that Sophronia privately suspected her mother of not noticing the extras. Mrs. Temminnick was occupied with preparing Petunia for a London Season, her little country ball having garnered enough attention to warrant a mention in the *Morning Post*. It came as a relief to pack her youngest daughter and associated compatriots back to what she could only surmise was a respectable finishing school that would hopefully rid Sophronia of her many manifest flaws.

Little did she know.

Sophronia returned to Mademoiselle Geraldine's to find the prototype safely ensconced at Bunson's and already under reproduction, a commendation in her school record for unwarranted but well-executed fancy-dress operation maneuvers, and Bumbersnoot waiting quietly in the sitting room with a note pinned to his buttocks.

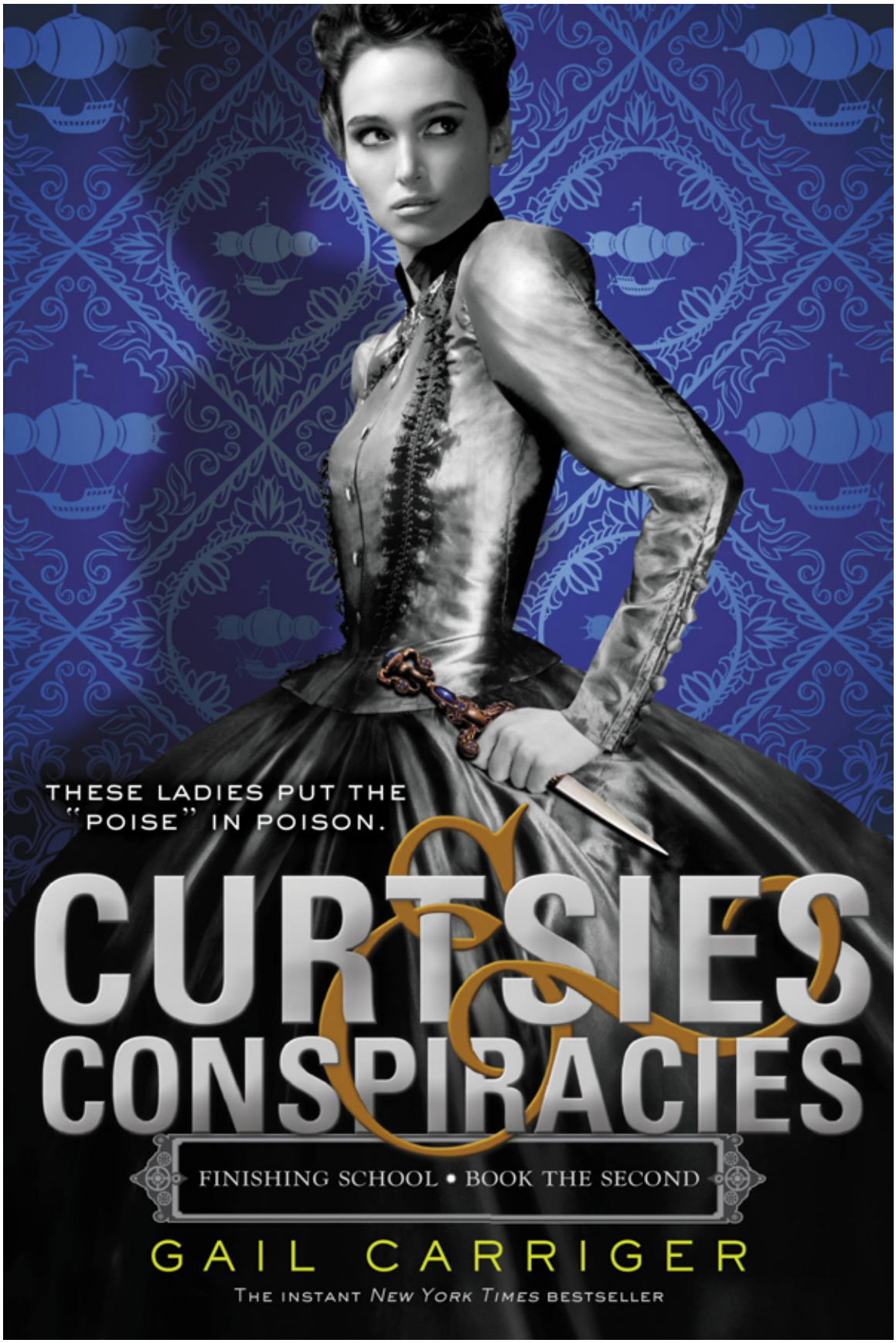
"Next time," read the note, "please use a more genteel method of object transfer. There is ash all down my evening dress. Yours, etc. Mrs. B."

Sophronia patted her mechanimal on his head. "Nicely done, Bumbersnoot."

Bumbersnoot belched a puff of steam in satisfaction and wagged his

mechanical tail—tick-tock, tick-tock.

The End


THESE LADIES PUT THE "POISE" IN POISON.
CURTSIES & CONSPIRACIES
FINISHING SCHOOL • BOOK THE SECOND
GAIL CARRIGER
THE INSTANT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

CURTSIES & CONSPIRACIES

Finishing School Book the Second

GAIL CARRIGER

Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston

For Trev

Dangerous Puddings

Miss Temminnick. Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. With me, please, ladies."

Sophronia glanced up from her household sums. She was glad of the distraction. She was convinced she was miscalculating the purchase of the three most deadly flower arrangements. *Does one need four fully grown foxgloves for decorating a dinner table for six guests? Or is it six foxgloves to kill four fully grown guests?*

Unfortunately, what Sophronia saw when she looked up did not fill her with confidence. Lady Linette stood at the front of the class wearing an austere expression that clashed with her copious yellow curls and a bonnet covered with drooping silk lilacs. She was wearing a good deal of face paint and a purple-and-jade plaid dress of immense proportions. It was neither her expression nor her location at the front of the class that made Sophronia nervous. It was the fact that she was present in *this* class, for this was Sister Mathilde Herschel-Teape's lesson on domestic accounting. Sophronia and her age-group were to go to Lady Linette *after* tea, for drawing room music and subversive petits fours.

"This decade, Miss Temminnick!"

Dimity was already standing next to Lady Linette. Sophronia's friend gestured her forward with a hand hidden to one side of her skirt. Ordinarily, it was Dimity daydreaming and Sophronia having to chivy *her* along.

Sophronia leapt to her feet. "Apologies, Lady Linette. I was so very absorbed. Foxglove quantities can be most illuminating."

"Very good, Miss Temminnick. An excuse couched in terms of academic

interest. Nevertheless, we must be away."

For most of Sophronia's six-month sojourn at Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality, lessons had *never* been interrupted. Not even when flywaymen attacked. Young ladies of quality stayed *in* class in times of strife. Certainly no student had been removed from one teacher's purview by another teacher. That was quite rude!

Then over the last month, starting with the dratted Monique, every one of Sophronia's fellows had systematically been taken away by Lady Linette in just such a manner. They returned traumatized and silent. All Sophronia's skills, many of them learned at Mademoiselle Geraldine's, had been put to figuring this out. To no avail. Even her particular friends, Sidheag and Agatha, wouldn't explain what had happened when Lady Linette absconded with them.

Sister Mattie was unperturbed by the interruption, sitting placidly in her mock-religious attire behind a wide desk surrounded by potted plants and bottles of deadly poison (or tea concentrate, one never knew which). Sister Mattie was a bit of a mystery; her preference for a simulated nun's habit—wide-skirted and to the current fashion, with a wimple partly configured like a bonnet—remained unexplained. The girls saw her as a nice sort of mystery and one of the more benign teachers, so they mostly respected her eccentric choice of dress.

Sophronia's fellow students were looking on with wide eyes. Sidheag and Agatha tensed sympathetically. Monique and Preshea sat with arms crossed and ill-contained delight on their faces.

Sophronia wended her way through the plush chairs and rolltop writing desks to the front, where she curtsied before Lady Linette. It was a perfectly executed curtsy, not too deep, with a slight tilt to her head but not enough to seem obsequious.

Sister Mattie said kindly, "I shouldn't worry, Miss Temminnick. I'm certain you'll do very well."

"Follow me, please, ladies," snapped Lady Linette.

"Good luck!" Agatha said quietly. Agatha rarely spoke, so it had to be something serious.

Sophronia sidled up next to Dimity. The hallway was hardly big enough to accommodate two ladies in full day gowns side by side. Their multiple skirts smushed together. Neither minded the wrinkles as they linked arms

for comfort. Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy was housed in a massive airship that looked like three dirigibles crammed together. Its corridors twisted and turned in a noodlelike manner. Sometimes the passageways led up stairs or out onto balconies. Most of the time, they simply got darker, lit by gas lamps that looked like upside-down parasols. Whatever attire the corridors had been designed to accommodate, proper lady's dress was not one of them.

Lady Linette led them toward the upper squeak decks. These open-air decks sat under the massive balloons that kept the academy afloat and adrift over Dartmoor. It was an odd place to be headed at this time of day. Dimity's hand on Sophronia's arm tightened.

The two girls swung to flatten themselves against the wall, like a hinged gate, so a maid mechanical could roll past. Its face was a mosaic of gears instead of the metal masks worn by most menials. It had a white pinafore over its conical body and gave the impression of busy superciliousness.

If the students had been alone, the maid would have whistled the alarm upon encountering them, but Dimity and Sophronia were in the company of Lady Linette. All the models, from buttlinger to footmech to clangermaid, had protocols that instructed them to ignore students in the company of teachers. Most of the hallways were laid down with a single track upon which the school's many servants trundled, performing the myriad of menial tasks needed to keep a ladies' seminary running smoothly. Sophronia had once seen a footmech model carrying a whole stack of doilies, some of them quite deadly, from Sister Mattie to Professor Lefoux. In her parents' country estate, such an important task would never have been entrusted to a mechanical, but here steam-powered staff far outnumbered human.

Sophronia had thought, after six months, that she had most of the school mapped. But as they walked from the midship student section, which housed classrooms and sleeping quarters, to the rear recreation area, they entered a place she'd never seen before. While the massive dining hall and exercise facilities above the warehouse and propeller engine areas were familiar to her, Sophronia and Dimity were being taken farther up.

"I didn't know there were rooms *above* the dining hall," said Sophronia to Lady Linette.

Lady Linette was not going to give in to Sophronia's hunt for

information. She ignored the comment and quickened her pace.

Sophronia and Dimity bounced in order to keep up—they had not yet had lessons on rapid walking in full skirts, though both of them were admirable gliders at a more leisurely pace.

This section of the ship smelled of old candle wax, chalk powder, and pickled onions. The mechanical track was not oiled properly and there was dust in the corner grippers. The walls were hung with paintings of disapproving elderly females and framed feats of crochet.

Finally, Lady Linette stopped in front of a door. The sign read ASSESSMENT CHAMBER ONE: ENTER AT RISK. It reminded Sophronia a little of the record room. She didn't say anything about that, though. The record room infiltrators of several months ago had never been caught. Sophronia wanted to keep it that way.

Underneath the sign someone had scrawled in white paint NO MUFFINS FOR YOU! Underneath that, it said NOR GALOSHES, NEITHER, in what Sophronia knew was not proper grammar.

"Miss Temminnick." Lady Linette gestured. "If you would?"

Sophronia stepped into the room alone. Lady Linette closed the door behind her.

Sophronia's attention was entirely taken by the huge mechanical thingamabob in front of her. It looked very like the difference engine she had seen last summer when her family visited the Crystal Palace. This one, however, was not being used for sums. It was rigged and draped with objects—fabric hung at the back, paintings dangled, and a few pots and pans drooped uncertainly to one side.

Sophronia frowned. *Didn't Vieve once describe something like this to me? What did she call it? Oh, yes, an oddgob machine.*

Next to the oddgob, positioned to operate a crank, was a mechanical designed to accompany the apparatus.

Sophronia faced both, hands crossed lightly at her waist, a position that Lady Linette encouraged her girls to assume whenever at a loss for action. "The crossed hands denote modesty and religious devotion. The placement draws attention to the narrowness of one's waist. Bow your head slightly and you can still observe through the lashes, which is becoming. This exposes the back of the neck, an indication of vulnerability." Sophronia's

shoulders tended to hunch, a habit Mademoiselle Geraldine was trying desperately to break. “We can’t have you tensing up like an orangutan!” she chided. “Do orangutans tense?” Dimity had whispered. Dimity, of course, crossed her hands divinely.

Sophronia worked to relax her shoulders.

Neither the machine nor the mechanical seemed to care, for nothing happened even when her posture was perfect.

Sophronia said, “Good afternoon. I believe you are waiting for me?”

With a puff of steam, the mechanical whirred to life. “Sixmonth. Review. Debut upmark,” it said, clicking as a metal tape fed through its voice box.

Not knowing what else to do, Sophronia said, “Yes?”

“Begin,” ordered the mechanical, and with that, it reached out one clawlike appendage and began to crank the oddgob.

An oil painting flipped over from the top of the engine and dropped down, dangling from conveyer chains. It depicted a girl in a blue dinner dress, decades out of style, that embarrassing nightgown look. The subject was pretty, with cornflowers in her hair, enjoying an evening gathering.

The mechanical continued cranking, and the painting was jerked away. A hatch opened, and a full tea service on a silver tray rolled forth.

“Serve,” ordered the mechanical.

Sophronia stepped forward, feeling silly. The service was for four. The tea in the pot was cold. She hesitated. Ordinarily, she would have dumped the contents into the receptacle and sent it back with sharp words to the cook. *Do I act as I would in real life? Or am I to pretend to serve the tea regardless?*

The mechanical was still whirring, indicating that she had only a set amount of time to decide.

Sophronia served. She did as etiquette demanded, pouring her own cup first and then the others. With no one to ask if they wanted sugar or if they would prefer lemon, she only checked to ascertain both were provided. The sugar pot was half full. There were four slices of dry lemon. Like the tea, they had been sitting for some time. She opened the top of the pot and checked the leaf. Top quality. As was the tea set—Wedgwood blue, or a very good imitation. She sniffed the pot, the milk, and the cups. They all smelled as they should, although one of the cups might have boasted a

slight lavender odor. There was a plate of three petits fours dusted with sugar. Sophronia poked each gently on the side with a glove-covered fingertip. She was unsurprised to find that one of them was fake, no doubt from Mademoiselle Geraldine's personal collection. The headmistress had a mad passion for fake pastries. The other two appeared to be real. They both smelled of bitter almond. Sophronia raised up her Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification, a present on her fifteenth birthday from Dimity's brother, Pillover. It was essentially a high-powered monocle on a stick, but useful enough to keep at all times hanging from a chatelaine at her waist. The sugar on the top of one of the cakes looked odd.

The tray was whisked away.

Next, a string of dangling hair ribbons paraded before her, pinned like wet hose to a stretch of twine. Sophronia's dress today was a pale-yellow-and-blue ruffled monstrosity her mother insisted would *do*, even though it had been worn three seasons already, by three older sisters. Sophronia's absence from the Temminnick household was combined with an absence from Temminnick expenses. She hadn't had a new gown in ages. One of the ribbons was cream and blue in a similar shade to her outfit, so Sophronia unclipped it. Because her hair was covered—as it should be—by a respectable bonnet, she tied the ribbon about her neck in the complex knot of a Bunson's boy. Bunson and Lacroix's Boys' Polytechnique was an evil genius training academy, sort of a sibling school to Mademoiselle Geraldine's. If one thought of those siblings as hostile and estranged.

The ribbons were taken away, and the oddgob machine presented Sophronia with a new selection: a letter opener, a pair of ornate lady's sewing scissors, a large fan, a crumpet, two handkerchiefs, and some white kid gloves. Sophronia felt she was on firmer ground at last. These were tools of great and fateful weight when applied properly. She chose the scissors and one of the handkerchiefs. The other options were removed.

Next came a slate upon which had been written the phrase SEND HELP IMMEDIATELY. In front of it, on a wooden board, lay a piece of parchment with ink and quill, an embroidery hoop with needle and thread, and a bag of raspberry fizzy sweets. Sophronia chose the sweets, cracked one open with the aid of her scissors, and dumped out the fizz. She used the needle from the embroidery to prick her finger, smeared the blood on the inside of the

broken sweet, and popped it back inside the little sack. Then she cut off a bit of the ribbon tied about her neck and used that to secure the bag.

The remaining items disappeared into the oddgob, and the mechanical stopped cranking.

Sophronia stepped back and let out a sigh.

Her stomach rumbled, informing her that a good deal of time had passed. She had been given longer to contemplate each test than she realized. A bang sounded at the door. When she opened it, a maid mechanical sat there, bearing a tray of food. Sophronia took it gratefully, and the maid trundled off without ceremony. Sophronia closed the door with her foot and, in the absence of chairs, balanced the tray precariously on one section of the oddgob.

She assessed the food. Nothing smelled of almonds. Nevertheless, she avoided the leg of mutton in glistening currant jelly sauce and the Bakewell pudding and ate only the plain boiled potatoes and broccoli. Better to assume everything was still a test until Lady Linette returned to tell her otherwise. Sad, because she loved Bakewell. When nothing else happened, Sophronia put the tray down and examined the oddgob while it was not waggling things autocratically in front of her.

It was a fascinating apparatus. She wondered if Vieve knew of its existence at the school. Genevieve Lefoux was a dear friend, a mercurial ten-year-old with a propensity for dressing like a boy and a habit of inventing gadgetry. If Vieve didn’t know of the oddgob, she would want to, and she was certain to ask all sorts of questions. Sophronia took mental notes in anticipation of conversations to come. When tired of that, she used the scissors to extract a small part from the machine. It was a crystalline valve, faceted, and awfully familiar in shape and style. It looked like a smaller version of the prototype Monique had tried to steal last year. This valve appeared to have been only propped in, so Sophronia was certain that removing it would make no difference to the function of the oddgob. When they’d first discovered the prototype valve last year, Vieve had prattled on about point-to-point transmissions. A revelatory breakthrough indeed, since the telegraph machine had recently proved a dismal failure. If this was a new version of that same prototype, Vieve would want to see it.

The door behind Sophronia creaked open, and she hastily stashed the mini-prototype up her sleeve, where the pagoda style allowed for secret

pockets.

“Miss Temminnick, have you finished?” Lady Linette asked.

“Isn’t everyone finished at the same time? The oddgob cycle seems to be prescribed,” replied Sophronia.

“Now, now, manners.”

Sophronia curtsied apologetically, although she did feel as if she had been abandoned for longer than necessary.

“I had to assess Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott first. Technically, she was admitted ahead of you. If you’ll recall, you went for tea with Mademoiselle Geraldine before you were formally allowed into the school.”

Sophronia recalled it quite vividly, as a matter of fact. All those fake cakes.

“Now for your report.” Lady Linette removed something round and mechanical from her reticule and shook it violently. Was she mad?

Nothing happened.

“They said it was working. Oh, bother.” Frustrated, Lady Linette marched over to the oddgob and jerked a few cranks and switches on the underside of the mechanical’s carapace. In response, the mechanical turned a smaller, hidden crank at the back, well out of human reach. On the far end of the oddgob, a massive roller ratcheted down, dipped into a pan of ink, and rolled across a series of letters. These then beat down in a sequential blur onto a taut piece of parchment. A large pink blotter rocked back and forth across the finished text.

Sophronia was impressed. She hadn’t noticed that the oddgob contained a printing press.

Something rattled in the machine and then whined.

“Stop that,” said Lady Linette to the oddgob, shaking the mysterious object in her hand at it again.

Oh, dear, perhaps the mini-prototype was vital, thought Sophronia.

The oddgob whined louder and began to shake.

“Stop cranking,” Lady Linette instructed the mechanical, shaking the object harder. “Miss Temminnick, I think we had better make haste.” The teacher gestured for Sophronia to precede her from the room.

Too late, however, for the oddgob exploded with a terrific bang. Hair ribbons fluttered up into the air, the tea service shattered, the fake tea cake bounced like a rubber ball, and ink squirted out from the printing press.

Sophronia and Lady Linette flattened themselves on the floor, heedless of crushed dresses and flipped petticoats.

“My goodness,” said Lady Linette into the resulting silence. “What did you do?” She stood and walked to the oddgob, now tilted to one side as if it had a limp.

“Me? Nothing at all!” insisted Sophronia, sitting up.

Lady Linette tutted as she brushed ink spatter off her well-powdered cheek with a handkerchief. “Where’s the new valve gone?”

“What valve?” Sophronia blinked wide, confused eyes at her.

Lady Linette gave her a long look. “Probably rolled free during the explosion. I told Professor Lefoux it wasn’t tight enough in the cradle. And I said it wouldn’t work properly regardless.” Sophronia didn’t say anything. “I wish we could have tested it on a less valuable machine. Never mind, we’ve got your results.” Lady Linette waved the oddgob’s printed paper.

Sophronia stood and innocently offered her teacher the additional handkerchief she’d acquired during the test. Lady Linette took it absently, then paused, pondering. She did not apply it to the remains of the ink on her face, instead handing it back with a little smile.

“Oh, very good, Miss Temminnick. Very good indeed!” She examined the printed sheet. Closely.

“Let us begin your review. The painting, time period?”

“Eighteen fourteen, by attire,” said Sophronia. “Give or take a year. Evening party.”

“Dress color?”

“Blue on the central subject, green and cream on those in the background.”

“Bonnet style and decoration?”

Trick question! “None of the ladies were wearing hats. The subject had cornflowers in her hair. As I said, it was an evening party.”

Lady Linette arched an eyebrow over her spectacles. “And have you any additional thoughts?”

Sophronia straightened. “A great many.”

“About the painting, Miss Temminnick. Don’t be coy.”

Sophronia forbore mentioning that Lady Linette had said only yesterday that there was always time for coyness in young ladies of quality. “The painting was well executed, but the artist was probably poor.”

Lady Linette looked nonplussed. “Why do you say that?”

“No expensive pigments, like red and gold, were used. Either that, or the painter feared toxicity. He did not sign it. There were approximately twelve people in the image.” Sophronia paused delicately for effect. “And one cat. The wallpaper was striped, and the garden through the window had a Roman feel.”

Lady Linette nodded, dislodging her spectacles. She reseated them on her nose with a sniff of annoyance. Lady Linette always dressed younger than she was. Spectacles, under such circumstances, might be considered a fate worse than knitwear.

“Moving on to the tea service, Miss Temminnick. The tea was cold. Why did you still serve it?”

Sophronia nibbled her lip. It was another habit her teachers were trying to eliminate. “If you must draw attention to the lips, a small lick is superior. It is too academic to nibble” was Lady Linette’s customary admonishment. “It’s all very well to be an intellectual, but one shouldn’t let others see. That’s embarrassing” was Mademoiselle Geraldine’s opinion.

Sophronia stopped nibbling. “I did consider dumping it entirely, but I thought the oddgob indicated I was to be evaluated on the *act* of serving. Had there been other people present, I would have sent it back.”

“Milk first, the lower-class way?”

“But necessary if the cups were lined with an acid-based poison. The milk would curdle or discolor. Also, one of the cups smelled of lavender.”

Lady Linette said, unguardedly, “It did?”

“Yes. I don’t know of any poisons with that smell, but it might be used to cover over another scent or, of course, it might have been your cup, Lady Linette.”

“*My* cup?”

“You *always* smell of lavender.”

“The tea cakes?”

“One was fake. Of the other two, both smelled of bitter almond—one because it was an almond cake, I believe. The other was powdered in cyanide.” Sophronia had been saddened by the cyanide lesson with Sister Mattie. For the rest of her life—unless she learned to bake—almond cake was right out. There was no surefire way to guarantee lack of cyanide in any almond-smelling confection.

“Moving on to the ribbons.”

Sophronia explained, “I selected the one that matched my outfit and tied it in a Bunson’s knot.”

“There’s a piece missing.”

Sophronia grinned. “I must beg your patience in that matter, my lady.”

Her teacher was taken aback but continued. “Why the Bunson’s knot?”

Sophronia parroted a recent article she’d translated from the Parisian fashion papers. Vieve, of all people, had given it to her. Vieve might dress like a newspaper boy, but she took an interest in current styles, particularly hats. This article had delighted the young girl. “It has a pleasing military feel. I read recently that the juxtaposition and power of masculine elements can inspire confidence in the wearer, and the accompanying aura of authority is never a bad thing,” Sophronia paraphrased.

Lady Linette looked impressed. This was not part of any lesson. “And *do* you feel more confident and authoritative, Miss Temminnick?”

Sophronia touched the ribbon. “Actually, I do.”

Lady Linette nodded. “It would be a good style for you to pursue. I suggest you encourage your mother to have at least one new dress made up with military detailing.” She gave Sophronia a pitying look.

Sophronia blushed. She and Dimity did their best to make over her dresses. But her older ones had such a narrow silhouette, and with skirts getting progressively wider, there wasn’t much they could do. It was impossible to add volume to a dress. And this was a finishing school—everyone *noticed* such things. Still, if Lady Linette thought more masculine fashions might suit her, perhaps gold tassels and epaulets were in order. Dimity would be over the moon.

Lady Linette interrupted her reverie. “You chose the sewing scissors and one of the handkerchiefs from the next test. Why?”

“We have not completed knife training with Captain Niall, so I wasn’t confident in the letter opener, but I know I can work scissors to my advantage, and it is always good to have an extra handkerchief.”

“Why not the fan or the gloves?”

“White kid is impractical for a lady of covert activities. We have not had any fan training yet.”

“The crumpet?”

“Oh, no, I’m not worthy.”

“Lastly, we had you send a coded message. Give it to me.”

Sophronia presented her with the bag of sweets tied with the bit of ribbon.

Lady Linette nodded her approval. “Ribbon used to indicate character of the sender. Nice touch, Miss Temminnick. You made use of the scissors from the previous selection.” She opened the bag and poured out the contents, including the one carefully broken sweet with the blood inside.

Lady Linette sniffed it and examined the stain. “Show me your hand.”

Sophronia removed one glove to display the finger she had pricked.

“You would have had to set up the code ahead of time. Nevertheless, an innovative method of getting a message across, and virtually untraceable, particularly as your recipient can eat the sweet.” Lady Linette looked down once more at the printed paper, then produced a stick of graphite and made some notes at the bottom.

Sophronia could feel her shoulders tensing and fought to keep them down. *Were my choices correct? Do they want the expected route, or is it better if I did something out of the ordinary? Will they send me down?* Sophronia was in ever-greater fear that her sojourn at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s might come to a premature end. Only half a year ago she had resisted finishing school with every fiber of her being, until she realized Mademoiselle Geraldine’s offered no ordinary education. Now she dreaded the possibility of returning home to her former life.

Lady Linette said, “Everyone’s results are given together. You will receive your final marks in front of your peers.”

Sophronia’s heart sank. This explained the pale faces of the other girls—anticipated trauma. Agatha, in particular, hated public exposure.

“However, my initial assessment is that your capacities are suited to our institution. You are overly independent. I suggest focused study in social congregation and deportment. Groups, Miss Temminnick, are your weakness. Generally speaking, most *lone* intelligencers are men, not women. We ladies must learn to manipulate society.”

Sophronia could feel herself flushing. It was a fair assessment, but she did not like criticism. She knew she was good. Better than many of the other girls of her age-group. True, Sidheag could beat her in physical combat, Dimity and Preshea were more ladylike, and Monique was better at social graces, but Sophronia was the best at espionage. Nevertheless, she

held her tongue and stared at her hands, forcing herself not to clasp them tightly. Lady Linette had only said that *most* lone intelligencers were male. Perhaps once in a while there was room for a female.

“Thank you, Miss Temminnick. You are dismissed.”

Sophronia bobbed a curtsy. It was just shy of being too high and too brief and thus rude. But before Lady Linette could comment, Sophronia swept from the room in a manner so grand that no teacher at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s would critique the action.

Results Disorientated

Sophronia found Dimity waiting in the hallway. Her friend's face was white and her lower lip trembled.

"Oh, Sophronia," she cried. "Wasn't that *perfectly* ghastly?"

She's getting more and more dramatic, thought Sophronia. *Overexposure to Mademoiselle Geraldine*. "It certainly was odd." Sophronia's gift for understatement was almost as good as Dimity's gift for overstatement.

"I poured the cold tea," admitted Dimity. "Did you?"

Sophronia nodded.

"Oh, good, I thought you might. You're usually right about these things."

"Not always."

Dimity was crestfallen. "Oh, dear. Your assessment wasn't wholly positive?"

"Not by half!"

Dimity brightened. "Really? Neither was mine. That's good, then. Perhaps I won't fail."

"I thought you *wanted* to be sent down. I thought you wanted to be put into a *real* finishing school, to become an ordinary lady with a respectable parliamentary husband and no concerns beyond planning the next dinner party."

"I did. I mean, I do. But Mummy would be so very disappointed, and I would have to leave you. And Sidheag. And Bumbersnoot."

Sophronia could only agree with Dimity's logic. "True."

“Speaking of which, I must talk with you about this letter I received.” Dimity flashed a suspiciously embossed missive.

Sophronia grabbed for it.

Dimity was faster. “No, you can’t see it until we are with the others.”

Sophronia stuck her tongue out but waited obligingly until after luncheon. Due to the presence of Monique and Preshea in the drawing room, Agatha and Sidheag joined Sophronia and Dimity in their private room for a gossip.

Both embarrassed and excited, Dimity produced the letter. “It’s from Lord Dingleproops!”

“Dimity,” objected Agatha, “should you be getting private correspondences from an unattached gentleman friend?”

“No, but this is the first. I didn’t write to him! And it can’t be that bad; our families *are* acquainted.”

Agatha was properly concerned. “Has he permission to court you?” Agatha Woosmoss was small, round, and redheaded, with a freckled face that wore a perpetual expression of distressed confusion, not unlike that of a damp cat.

Dimity flushed even redder. “No, but I’m certain he would.”

Sidheag was reading the hastily scrawled note. “It’s worse than simply a letter. He wants to meet with you, in private and secretly!”

“Dimity!” Sophronia said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Dimity was truculent. “Because I knew you’d be all Sophroniaish about it. That’s why. It’s not *that* bad, is it? He probably only wants to chat a bit about the weather or something.”

Sidheag, still in possession of the shocking missive, said, “Since it says here that he intends to come to you on this airship, it can’t be *that* banal.” Sidheag Maccon was an overly tall young woman, almost of an age with Sophronia. She had a long, proud face and a general attitude of indifference to both manners and dress that drove their teachers to distraction.

Sophronia was having none of it. “Dimity, he’d have to steal an airdinghy and then try to find us. I’ve no idea where we are over Dartmoor, do you? I’m sure he doesn’t. Besides, I don’t think Bunson’s has airdinghies. The whole idea is foolhardy.”

Dimity liked Lord Dingleproops rather more than she ought and was disposed to think well of him. “It must be important, then, mustn’t it?

Perhaps it’s a declaration!”

“Oh, Dimity, really!” said Agatha.

Sophronia added, “You’re only just fourteen, and he’s what, sixteen?”

Dimity protested, “My birthday was weeks ago!”

Sidheag, the blunt one, said, “He isn’t even holding yet. He can’t declare without his parents’ permission.” Sidheag could be quite crass, the result of having been raised by men, or Scots, or soldiers, or werewolves, or all four. Since she was also Lady Kingair, her crassness would have been an accepted eccentricity—in a much older aristocrat. In a fourteen-year-old, such vulgarity was as odd and uncomfortable as last season’s hat.

Sophronia took the missive out of Sidheag’s hand and examined it. It was under the Earl of Dingleproops’s heading, which gave it a certain weight. But she did wonder what the son was doing with his father’s stationery. Probably using it to write angry letters to poor tradesmen in his father’s name and torture decent young ladies like Dimity.

“He wants to meet with you on the back squeak deck in a week and a half?”

Dimity nodded. “Isn’t that romantic?”

Agatha protested. “You’re not *going*?”

“Of course I’m going! He will have come all this way.”

“It’ll all end in tears,” foretold Sidheag morosely.

Sophronia said nothing further; Dimity could be awfully stubborn. Privately, Sophronia vowed to follow Dimity. Lord Dingleproops was up to something.

They were made to wait until the end of the week for their test assessments. At long last, after supper, instead of the customary parlor games and card counting, their age-group was separated from the others. Agatha looked like she might faint, or cry, or palpitate, or all three—which would be a real feat. Preshea—small, dark, and unreasonably lovely—looked like she intended to kill someone. But then, Preshea always looked that way. Dimity’s round porcelain face was set. Monique, having been through this before, swept her skirts behind her with an air of determination. Sidheag loped along as though she hadn’t a care in the aether. Sidheag could be irritating like that.

Sophronia wondered how she herself was showing tension. Not at all, to those who did not look at her shoulders. She would have been surprised by how impressed Lady Linette was with this accomplishment. Lady Linette had also been impressed when Sophronia ate only the vegetables from the meal provided after the exam. Sophronia was the only student to have considered that the test might include the meal. Even Monique, who should have known better, had eaten seven bites of her meat and all her pudding.

Lady Linette led them to her own teaching quarters. These were decorated as if a boudoir had procreated with the set of *She Stoops to Conquer*. There were red curtains, a good deal of gold, and chaise longues instead of chairs. Several fluffy cats with funny scrunched-up faces and possessive attitudes to hassocks lounged about.

Lady Linette left the six girls there.

They sat in expectant silence. Agatha stared at her feet. Sidheag slouched. Both knew better but were regressing into bad habits out of anxiety.

Professor Lefoux entered the room.

An almost audible groan met the appearance of this, the harshest of their teachers.

Professor Lefoux was not so much a battle-ax as a pair of pinking cutters—sharp, toothy, and uneven in temper but very useful. They hadn't any lessons with her yet. Rumor had it she was deemed too fierce for the younger girls. Tall and bony, with a stiff face and hair scraped back into a bun, she *looked* mean. She also had a French accent, which hundreds of years of animosity had trained nice young Englishwomen to suspect as evil.

Professor Lefoux did not bother to explain her presence. "Monique de Pelouse, your assessment is not really one of six months, as you have now been in attendance at this school for four years and eight months. Nevertheless, due to your attempted theft of the crystalline valve prototype last year and your regression in status as a result of that failure, you are undergoing public review along with the others of your rank."

Monique sat silent, her gaze straight forward, her attitude one of superiority rather than penance.

"Your marks are as expected. You are a fair intelligencer but prone to lack of creativity, which could get you killed. You are ladylike but favor overt manipulation, which could get you ostracized. Given your age, it is

the recommendation of the staff that you marry with no second attempt at finishing."

Monique looked, for the first time in Sophronia's miserable association with the girl, as if she might genuinely cry. Sophronia had seen her fake-cry on several occasions, but never had an honest tear come from those pretty blue eyes. The blonde said, "How could you? Why, I ought to have my father refuse funding. I shall report you to my *special friend* for this."

Sophronia perked up. She knew Monique had an advocate on staff, but this was the first time the girl had admitted it publicly.

Professor Lefoux interrupted any further tirade. "Silence, young lady. You are to remain a student here until your coming-out ball and will conduct yourself as such. You will do very well for yourself in society, but it is the formal assessment of this institution that even with retraining, you could not exceed your personality. You are *not* to be made an agent."

Am I seeing things, wondered Sophronia, *or is that a smile on Professor Lefoux's face?*

Monique rose as though she might storm from the room.

"Sit down, Miss Pelouse!" ordered Professor Lefoux. "You are required to witness all the assessments."

Monique resumed her seat, almost trembling.

"Preshea Buss." Preshea's dark eyes were wide, and her normally crafty face was carefully blank.

"You are adept at social manipulation but too apt to trade on your looks for assistance. You underestimate intelligence, even your own. Improve your execution, or you will be good only for marriage without covert orders."

Preshea protested, "But I've been here less than a year!" She spoke precisely and sharply, as though each word were being murdered by her mouth.

"Which is why we tell you this *now*."

"What if I *want* to get married?" grumbled Preshea under her breath to Agatha.

"I thought that was one of the ways to finish," Sophronia whispered to Dimity.

"It is, but to be dismissed into marriage without covert orders is dishonorable."

“Miss Temminnick, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, if you would like to include the rest of the class in your discussion?” Professor Lefoux’s ire was turned abruptly on them.

Dimity and Sophronia looked up. “Sorry, Professor,” they singsonged in tandem.

Professor Lefoux glared but clearly wished to continue. “Agatha Woosmoss,” she barked.

Agatha’s bottom lip wobbled.

“Very poor marks indeed. Have you been paying any attention at all in your lessons? You are hereby put on probationary status for six months. You must improve both covert and social aspects of training. Your father is a great patron of our institution, but we cannot play favorites with a weak component.”

Agatha began to cry, fishing about for a handkerchief. As usual, she had misplaced hers. Sophronia passed her a spare, wincing in sympathy.

Professor Lefoux continued. “Sidheag Maccon, Lady Kingair.”

Sidheag looked directly at the teacher, like a soldier facing execution. The girl’s unique yellow eyes were wary.

“You chose all the weapons and showed excellent use of them, even the fan. However, your social skills are middling, and your dress and posture have entirely failed to improve. We understand your background is unusual and that your expectations are different from those of other students. We are sending you into Scottish society, but you will be presented at court eventually. A woman of your rank will need all skills, not only the ones you find interesting. You too are on probation, and your *father* has been informed of this.”

Sidheag looked more worried than Sophronia had ever seen her. Her so-called father, Lord Maccon, was really her great-great-great-grandfather and Alpha werewolf of the Kingair Castle pack. Sidheag always spoke of him with a fond irreverence. Now Sophronia could tell from her friend’s expression that he could also be fierce.

Professor Lefoux moved on to Dimity. “Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

Dimity’s face was ashen.

“Your marks are fair, although not as we would have hoped given your lineage. Your reluctance to pursue subterfuge does you a disservice when it is rooted in laziness. Your good humor may work in your favor if you can

harness it for information gathering and not simply gossip. Concentrate on combat and solo reconnaissance. You must build your character, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. Flibbertigibbets are only good if they have a solid foundation."

Dimity looked humbled but relieved. She clearly had thought she too would be placed on probation.

Professor Lefoux turned to Sophronia.

"Miss Temminnick, you are in receipt of the highest marks we have ever given in a six-month review. Your mind seems designed for espionage. Nevertheless, you veer away from perfect in matters of etiquette. Do not let these marks go to your head; there are many girls at this school who are better than you. Our biggest concern is what you get up to when we are not watching. Because, if nothing else, this test has told us you are probably spying on us, as well as everyone around you."

All the other girls in the room, even Dimity, turned to stare at Sophronia.

In that moment, Sophronia knew they hated her. And because she was exactly as Professor Lefoux had said, one small part of her wondered if her assessment had been inflated for precisely that reason: to challenge her by pitting her against her fellow students.

"Oh, Sophronia," hissed Dimity, "couldn't you have faked it a little?" Dimity hadn't a vengeful bone in her body, but even she could be manipulated.

Sophronia looked out from under her eyelashes at the others. Agatha was no longer holding back tears. Sidheag wore a small smile of discomfort. Preshea and Monique were openly hostile.

"Good luck," said Professor Lefoux to them all, almost cheerfully, before walking swiftly from the room.

Everyone began talking in hushed tones. Everyone, that is, except Sophronia. And no one talked to her, just *about* her.

"Isn't she Miss High and Snobby now?" hissed Monique.

"Bet she thinks the sun rises out of her tea in the morning," added Preshea in her sharp, clipped voice.

"Highest marks ever. Isn't that something? We witnessed history," said Sidheag, her yellow eyes cold.

"I can't believe I'm on probation. Papa will kill me," said Agatha, possibly not exaggerating. One never knew with parents who sent their

daughters to Mademoiselle Geraldine's.

Sophronia tried out tactics in her head. Just now, she had nothing to say that wouldn't sound falsely modest. Even if she told them her suspicion that she was being set up, she'd sound defensive. She would have to hope that Agatha and Sidheag would figure it out on their own. She felt certain, however, that she could count on Dimity.

Sophronia cocked her head to one side to look at her best friend.

Dimity looked away and said something sympathetic to Agatha.

Sophronia bit her lip and stared at her hands. She had thought Dimity would stay loyal, just a little bit.

The girls continued to ignore her all that day. It made for lonely classes and an uncomfortable evening meal. Sophronia tried not to let it affect her. They should recover from their resentment if she did nothing to aggravate them. But every time she performed a task well or answered a question correctly during lessons, she could feel the dislike. Several days saw no change to this pattern, and even Dimity still wasn't talking to her, which was particularly awkward, as they shared a bedroom. Sophronia was both annoyed and hurt. She stopped having an appetite at dinner and started filching the occasional roll for later. She even contemplated not following Dimity when the girl crept out of quarters for her assignation with Lord Dingleproops. But since Sophronia figured that the letter was some kind of cruel joke and that the boy wouldn't show up, she simply couldn't let her friend walk into heartbreak alone. So when Dimity snuck out of quarters, having changed at bedtime into her best evening dress rather than a nightgown, Sophronia followed.

Dimity used a series of evasion and climbing techniques to get around the ship. She held perfectly still and flattened herself against walls so mechanicals patrolling the hallways slid right by. It made getting around after hours very slow, and there was always a risk of discovery whenever a maid rolled into sight. Dimity was better at it than Sophronia had thought, which made her proud. After all, Sophronia had taught Dimity everything she knew on the subject.

Sophronia stayed out of sight, tracking her friend effortlessly, knowing

Dimity was headed to the back squeak deck. Sophronia had it easier. She used a small grappling rope knotted at stages for climbing, her own personal invention. It was undemanding to creep along the same level, but up and down could be a challenge on an airship hull. Sophronia had scavenged rope from the sooties and asked Vieve to build her a hook and the emission hurlie. The hurlie was a kind of turtle-shaped device that clipped to Sophronia's wrist. Vieve was fond of things that clipped to wrists. Once Sophronia flipped the catch at the turtle's tail, a spring-loaded release mechanism allowed her to fling the turtle's shell, with the grapple underneath, and the rope followed behind. Best of all, Sophronia didn't have to use the ladder from Lady Linette's balcony every time she wanted to visit the sooties.

Instead of climbing up onto the deck after Dimity, Sophronia continued edging around to the very back of the ship. She reeled in her grappling hook and hung off the side, looking into the skies, hunting for an airdinghy. Above her, the squeak deck was abandoned under its great balloon, except for Dimity. Dimity's view was obstructed by the smokestacks, mast, and propeller, but Sophronia could see around and between them. The school floated with the breeze, so the air around them felt still and windless.

Hours seemed to pass, and Sophronia was convinced that the letter was a hoax. Then she saw it, coming up from below—an airdinghy. There was someone crewing it, but she could make out nothing from her vantage point but its sail and four balloons.

Above, Dimity's silhouette came to the rails and looked out, but she could not see what Sophronia saw.

Sophronia wondered how Lord Dingleproops intended to board without setting off any of the school's alarms. The back was the safest choice, since teachers and staff slept in the forward section and students in the middle, but there were mechanicals everywhere. Several had protocols that had them do nothing but look for shapes in the sky and set off alarms in teachers' bedrooms when they saw something.

Fearlessly, the airdinghy rose up until it was almost level with Sophronia. She heard Dimity give a glad little cry of welcome. When Sophronia could finally see into the gondola, there were two men, not the one boy Dimity expected. Sophronia had met Lord Dingleproops once at a party; he was a reedy, chinless, redheaded blighter, and while tall and

strapping, he was not bulky. Both of these men were bulky. There was certainly something wrong.

As the airdinghy rose higher, Sophronia squinted, trying to make out more of the figures in the dark. Then she realized what was off about them. No top hats. No gentleman would ever meet a lady without appropriate headgear, even if that meeting was a joke. Whoever these men were, they were not noblemen. Plus, Lord Dingleproops was a member of the Pistons, a social club. A Piston's top hat was his marker, his sign of status; to travel without it was unthinkable.

Sophronia was not prepared to mount a defense, but she didn't want anything to happen to Dimity. She threw her bread roll from dinner at the men. It hit one in the head but didn't appear to do any permanent damage, even though it was a very hard roll. The man swore and looked up at her.

Sophronia cursed herself. All she had done was attract their attention, and one of them now pointed a pistol at her. Banking on the fact that he wouldn't want to fire because of the noise, she wrapped one arm tightly about the railing that was her current anchor and pointed her hurlie at the airdinghy. She ejected the grapple toward one of the four balloons. The grapple sailed over, but on the pull back she felt the barb catch and tear through the fabric.

The airdinghy lurched to one side.

The man guiding the dinghy yelled. The other shot his pistol at Sophronia, who swung out and to one side, avoiding the bullet.

Above them, Dimity said, "What's going on? Lord Dingleproops, is that you? Was that gunfire? You'll wake the teachers!"

Sophronia shot her grapple again, catching another one of the balloons and gashing it open. Two ripped balloons was more than the airdinghy could manage, and it began to spin and sink, gaining speed as it went. The men inside were now more concerned with their own safety than with Sophronia or Dimity.

Dimity squeaked in alarm, calling, "Wait, come back!" But her imagined suitor was gone.

Sophronia yelled up to her, "That wasn't Lord Dingleproops."

Dimity was annoyed enough to actually speak with her. "Sophronia? What are you doing following me?"

"Keeping you safe."

“By sabotaging my assignation?”

“I don’t know what they wanted, but they weren’t Pistons. No top hats.”

Clearly, Dimity preferred to believe in her own romantic visions than to see reason. “Oh, Sophronia, he was probably in disguise! Must you ruin everything?”

Sophronia couldn’t think of anything to say. Since she hadn’t determined what the strange men wanted with Dimity, she could hardly argue that she had protected Dimity from some sinister unknown. Perhaps one of them *had* been Lord Dingleproops, but she doubted it. Lord Dingleproops was the type to disguise himself, certainly, but he would dress up as a jester and still wear his top hat. Those men had been after Dimity, and they weren’t lordlings; Sophronia would stake her reputation on it.

As Sophronia climbed back to quarters, she reflected that perhaps it was best if Dimity didn’t believe that someone was after her, at least for the time being. Sophronia simply would have to keep an eye on her, whether she liked it or not. Of course, the question remained: who were they and what did they want with Dimity?

Diamonds from Sooties

Given that all her female friends were aloof and noncommunicative, Sophronia took refuge in the boiler room. There, fire and smoke turned scurrying workers into creatures of shadow, and boys not much older than Sophronia worked to keep the steam engines running and the airship afloat. Among these sooties, Soap stood out as the tallest, boldest, and shadowiest. Sophronia would have sworn he'd grown a foot in the months she'd known him. She was no petite lady herself, but Soap's lean, muscled form towered over her, his wide face made all the more handsome by its perpetual smile.

"I hear you did particularly well, miss." Phineas B. Crow—Soap for short, sootie by profession—attempted to look serious by concentrating on Bumbersnoot, but he couldn't hide his inherent cheekiness. He also couldn't hide the fact that he didn't care one whistle for her high marks.

"Soap, I wish I had access to your sources of information."

"You do, miss. Through me, a'course!" This comment was accompanied by a flash of glee from his dark eyes. "Here you go, Bumbersnoot." Sophronia's mechanimal was snuffling about in black dust, his clockwork tail *tick-tock ing* back and forth in excitement. He expressed his delight at the small bits of coal Soap dropped from above by eating them. Little puffs of smoke made his floppy leather ears flap.

"Didn't bring Miss Sidheag south with you this time?" Soap prodded gently.

Sophronia gave him a look.

"What, even *her*? You'd think she'd grog to the fact that you'd been

pickled."

"Not Sidheag. Takes everything at face value, that girl. It's one of the reasons she didn't do well.…" Sophronia trailed off, realizing what Soap had said. "*Even you* figured out I've been set up?"

Soap took offense. He stopped feeding Bumbersnoot. "Even me? I've been around this here school long enough to pick up a few tricks."

The mechanimal's tail slowed to a steady *tick-tock, tick-tock*.

Sophronia looked at her friend: his buoyant demeanor, his skin so dark it was often difficult to tell where he began and the soot left off. "Are you happy here, Soap?"

"Why, miss, what a question." Soap's ready smile faded slightly.

Bumbersnoot, ignored, puffed steam at them, as if to say, *What about me? No one asks if I'm happy. You know what would make me happy? More coal. Yoo-hoo, down here. You, with the coal!* There was, of course, a pile of coal nearby, but Bumbersnoot wasn't too bright. He was only a simple mechanimal, with very basic protocols.

"I mean, are you happy as a sootie?"

"Suits me well enough, miss. Decent hours. They let me get away with fooling about a bit. Not a bad life. Both my parents were slaves. Or that's what I've been told. Never knew 'em myself."

"You're quite smart, you know?"

Soap raised his eyebrows.

Sophronia took out a little book from her reticule. It was an early primer, meant for young children. She'd been teaching Soap to read lately. They used what bits of time they had and the light from one of the boilers. "I don't mean book learning, but smart in other ways."

Soap began to follow where the conversation was headed. "Your school don't train them like me," he said, "even if they took boys."

"Bunson's?"

"I ain't got the brain for science, miss. Only other stuff. Naw, leave me here; it'll do for now."

"But…"

"Now, miss, just because you ain't got any projects to work on, don't be casting them pretty peepers my way."

"Projects? What do you mean, *projects*?" Sometimes Sophronia couldn't understand a word that came out of Soap's mouth. She got the meaning

underneath, mostly. How could she not, when his own “pretty peepers” twinkled at her something terrible? *Flirt*.

“Miss Sidheag and them others you collect. Them as needs a little help to make it through. Them’s your projects. I ain’t interested. Course, if you wanted to make me somewhat else…” He trailed off and waggled his brows suggestively.

Sophronia cocked her head and lifted the primer. “You sure you aren’t a project?”

“Aw, miss, reading’s one thing, but I can’t be a gentleman, and that seems part and parcel of that secretive work of yours.”

“Doesn’t have to be.”

Soap was not to be persuaded. If Sophronia were to make an intelligencer of him, she’d have to do it without his knowing. “Well, I appreciate your sources; that’s all I’m saying,” she said.

Soap smiled, a flash of white teeth. “Speaking of which…” His eye had been caught by someone coming up behind Sophronia.

She whirled around to see a purposeful newsboy silhouette walking straight across the boiler room, like a delivery lad.

The engineering chamber was a mere hum of activity at night, unlike the crashing cacophony of daytime. Most of the sooties and greasers were asleep, and all of the officers, but the boilers always had to be tended. The flickering orange glow from the burning coal turned the cavernous room into a waltz of light. Sophronia adored it. Sooties trotted about, but none of them moved straight across the open space between boilers—they stopped to feed them. Only one person moved with such directness—Genevieve Lefoux.

“What ho?” said the scamp, dimpling up at them. Vieve was from above stairs; she belonged to Professor Lefoux, as much as she might be said to belong to anyone. But she was rather catlike about the situation. She never sat for lessons, and went wherever she pleased at whatever hour. Since she liked engines, much of her time was spent in the boiler room.

After the customary pleasantries, Vieve said in a sprightly manner, “Hear my aunt got you good, Sophronia.”

Sophronia cast the primer up at the ceiling in a gesture of appeal to higher powers. “You, too? Isn’t my business secret at all?”

“Well, I might have read the report. You made them allover sticky with

the highest six-month marks *ever*. Good on you, Miss Poofy Skirts."

"You turning against me, too?"

"Oh, I'm not miffed. Amused you had to go up against the brunt of Aunt's charms."

"She's a dragon, your aunt."

"Sing that! Now, about—oof!" Vieve stumbled as a sootie hurtled into her, knocking her over.

"Hey!" he yelled as Vieve bounced upright. "Watch it there, runt!"

Sophronia pulled her shoulders back. "You watch it, you turbot!"

The boy snorted at her. "Oh, mighty Uptop, what could you do to me?"

Soap stepped in when it looked like Sophronia might actually launch herself at the boy. "Run along now."

Strong from shoveling coal most of his life, Soap loomed over the smaller sootie. The boy scuttled off.

Sophronia sputtered. "Why, that turnip! Who does he think he is? Vieve, are you well?"

Vieve dimpled at her. "Don't concern yourself, miss. I'm not easily damaged."

Soap said to Sophronia, "Now, miss, don't go causing a ruckus in my domain, please."

Sophronia stopped vibrating. "Oh, dear. I am sorry. This thing with everyone angry at me has rather put my nerves on edge." Sophronia hoped Soap couldn't see how hurt she was by the ostracism. Soap's eyes were so direct, she rather thought he might see into her heart better than anyone.

Soap shook his head at her sympathetically. "Still, miss."

Sophronia agreed with the reprimand. She should have minded her manners, even with a sootie. Especially with a sootie. "Who was that unpleasant creature?" She thought she knew most of the boiler room staff by sight, if not by name.

"Don't know," admitted Soap, embarrassed.

"Don't know? But you know *all* the sooties!" Soap was like the unofficial mayor of boilers.

"That's just it. We've taken on double numbers this week. Double! Some pretty dubious types, too. Second Assistant Fireman should have checked their characters better, if you ask me. Us old guard been trying to get most of them assigned to forward engine and propeller, but they don't

need that many when we're drifting. So we've got 'em all mucking about here."

Sophronia looked around. "Have you taken on extra coal, too?"

Soap nodded.

"I didn't feel us go low to meet the supply train."

"Early yesterday morning, miss."

Vieve added, "They brought it in from Bristol special."

Sophronia said, "I take it you're thinking what I'm thinking."

"Someone plans to take this ship on a very long trip." Soap pulled out a wooden pipe, lit it up with a wick from a nearby boiler, and puffed.

Sophronia wrinkled her nose. *Revolting habit*. She schooled her expression when he looked at her, but he must have caught her distaste.

He took the pipe out of his mouth, looked at it as though it had done something offensive, and then tapped it out into a coal heap and tucked it away.

And he thinks he's not a gentleman! Sophronia smiled—a wide grin with no artifice to it.

Soap looked a little overwhelmed by the power of her approval. Sophronia was, as yet, unaware of the effect of her smile on boys.

Vieve watched this back-and-forth with interested green eyes.

Sophronia continued their conversation. "Leaving the moor, do you think?"

Soap nodded. "A certain."

"What else do you know?" Sophronia asked.

Soap shook his head. "Simply that, miss. I have tried, but them powers upstairs are keeping this one close."

They both looked to the ten-year-old girl dressed as a boy. Vieve had crouched down to play with Bumbersnoot. She shrugged. "You got more than me. No one's talked in my hearing."

"Lady Linette! She didn't give us our assessments. Perhaps she was called away to deal with this?" Sophronia mused.

"Which direction are we headed now, Soap?" Vieve asked.

Soap wandered over to a hatch in the floor of one corner of the massive room and stuck his head out of it. A few minutes later he returned. Soap always looked as though he didn't quite have control of his limbs, like a goat. But like a goat, he was sure-footed and powerful, despite appearances.

“Toward Swiffle-on-Exe, I’m thinking.”

Sophronia was impressed. This was a skill she hadn’t known Soap possessed. One stretch of heath looked much the same as another to her.

“Boilers will be needing water?” suggested Vieve. “For the journey?” Swiffle-on-Exe was a riverside town.

“I wonder if Bunson’s has a mission for us?” offered Sophronia. Bunson and Lacroix’s Boys’ Polytechnique was near Swiffle-on-Exe and the primary reason people visited.

“After Monique bungled the prototype retrieval? I doubt it,” muttered Vieve. “Things haven’t been roses between the schools since. Bunson’s won’t forgive Geraldine’s for nearly losing the only working device.”

Sophronia’s instincts took over. “How do you know that?”

“My aunt used to communicate regularly with a professor there.”

“Algonquin Shrimpdittle?”

“Yes, how…?”

“When we infiltrated Bunson’s last year, you used his name to get us past the porter.”

“You remember?” Vieve was impressed.

“It’s what I *do*.”

“Highest marks ever, right.” Vieve gave Sophronia a suspicious look. “Did you hold back during that test?”

Sophronia avoided her question by asking one in reply. “Did you know about the oddgob?”

Vieve nodded.

“Oh.” Sophronia was disappointed. “And I took such careful mental notes for you. Did you know it had a component part that looked a great deal like the prototype?”

Vieve frowned. “Not possible. Why would the oddgob need a crystalline valve frequensor? That valve is for wireless communication, nothing to do with oddgobbery.”

Sophronia shrugged and fished the item in question out of her reticule. She handed it to Vieve, experiencing some relief at no longer having it on her person. “Here, I stole it for you. Why don’t you tell me what it’s for?”

“Aw, Sophronia, how thoughtful. You brought me a present!” Vieve examined the mini-prototype for a moment. Soap and Sophronia watched her for signs of intrigue. “Amazing they let it fall into your hands, when

they made such a fuss over it only last year."

Sophronia nodded. "Unless it's no longer a prototype and already in production and distribution. Technology does move awful fast these days."

Vieve dimpled again. "I know, isn't it grand?" She pocketed the valve, only then realizing Sophronia had neatly avoided her earlier question. "So, *did* you hold back during that test?"

"Maybe a little," Sophronia admitted.

Soap grinned. "That's my girl."

Sophronia glared at him. He was getting familiar.

"You are, miss." He continued to grin.

"I'm my *own* girl, thank you very much."

"Sometimes. Sometimes you're mine, or Miss Dimity's, or even Vieve's."

Vieve was too young to follow this line of reasoning, but she was bound to agree with Soap if the conversation nettled Sophronia.

This one certainly did. In fact, Sophronia was finding it most flustering. She did not like being flustered, and she did not like that it was Soap doing the flustering. She wasn't quite sure what this meant, so she resorted to orders. "Stop it, Soap."

"For now, miss. You tell me when you want this conversation to continue."

"Oh, really!"

But Soap, who certainly could be a gentleman when he tried, left the subject at that and moved the discussion delicately on to the latest boiler room excitement: the sooties had adopted a kitten.

Sophronia visited the boiler room regularly for the next few nights. Things remained uncomfortable in class and chambers. Dimity was barely passing polite, and the other girls ignored Sophronia.

Of course, Bumbersnoot tried his best, but a mechanimal hadn't much conversation and wasn't really interested in speculating as to what might be afloat. Sophronia refused to volunteer any information to the others. The possibility of a visit to Swiffle-on-Exe and Bunson's—which meant young gentlemen—would have her compatriots in ecstasies of delighted

anticipation. So Sophronia held on to the news out of spite. She didn't try to warn Dimity that someone might be after her. Dimity would take it as a pathetic excuse for interference. Without knowing the motive behind that mystery attack, Sophronia had no way to make her case. She'd no idea how lonely such a decision could be. So she escaped to see Soap, and occasionally Vieve, most evenings. It was a risk. She might get caught, but it was better than the pointed silences.

Then one morning at breakfast, Mademoiselle Geraldine made an official announcement.

Mademoiselle Geraldine was a source of amusement to the students. She was, supposedly, the headmistress. She thought her school was a real finishing school and had no idea about the espionage side of things. This was an ongoing covert operation lesson for the students—all the girls had to participate in keeping their headmistress in the dark. She always addressed them at breakfast with such concerns and inanities as might be important were they attending an actual ladies' seminary. And, upon occasion, she was given something of substance to say by Lady Linette.

Over a light repast of giblet pie, boiled whiting, brawn, cold roast capon, and broiled haddock together with tea, brown bread, and sweet butter—the teachers did not approve of a heavy breakfast—Mademoiselle Geraldine informed them that they were headed to Swiffle-on-Exe for a brief stopover and that they could expect company once they arrived. The headmistress did not look pleased. Mademoiselle Geraldine might boast the rinsed red hair, loud voice, and well-upholstered figure of a former opera singer, but she took deportment *seriously*. Whoever their passenger was going to be, Mademoiselle Geraldine did *not* approve.

Accordingly, they arrived at the outskirts of Swiffle-on-Exe the next evening after dark. Instead of taking up their customary mooring point, off a goat path west of town, they went south and put down lines near the banks of the Exe.

The girls were all atwitter over this shift in tradition. Only Sophronia knew it was because they must take on boiler water. When everyone else was asleep, she crept out of quarters. It was dangerously busy in the hallway; the tracks were screaming with maid mechanicals, bustling to and fro carrying extra linens and washbasins. Sophronia had to flatten herself behind doors and inch along the walls at a pace so slow they wouldn't

register her. She decided not to visit the sooties, who would be too busy, and instead headed out onto a midlevel balcony. She leaned over the railing to watch as the airship sank down and nested, nose first, over the river, rustling the willow trees along the bank. Eventually, the front section, which housed the teachers' residence and engineering, bridged the water.

With a belch of smoke out the stacks and a loud rumbling, a huge articulated metal pipe ejected from the lower front of the hull. Standing on a midlevel deck, Sophronia was in good position to observe under the light of a half-moon.

The pipe was massive. Near its end was a set of four small inflated balloons. These rested atop the river and held the pipe, presumably, at exactly the correct angle. Round steps collapsed out like flower petals as the pipe telescoped down. Sooties in the boiler room must have been cranking up a storm to create suction, for with a slurping noise the pipe shuddered and began to take on water. It looked as though the airship were drinking up the river through a flute.

This task complete, sooties, tiny figures below her, ran down the finger keys of the flute. There were a few joyful whoops and splashes. Mortified, Sophronia realized they were bare. Having left their soot-covered clothes above, they were taking this as a rare opportunity to bathe. The water must have been freezing, but they looked to be having a rollicking good time. Sophronia supposed Soap was among them, but she couldn't distinguish individuals and wasn't certain she should. Nevertheless, she was so taken with the spectacle she nearly fell over the railing. There might have been some small part of her that wished for Vieve's binoculars.

The next morning, the airship was back in its regular visiting position, hovering over a hill west of town. The hodgepodge of buildings and mixed architecture that made up Bunson's school was in view down the path. Sophronia blushed to think upon what she had seen the night before, and regretted not having Dimity to share it with.

When Sophronia entered the communal parlor wearing a carriage dress because she could not do up the back of her day gowns by herself, Dimity was in huddle with Sidheag. Sophronia walked over to their group with an

open expression, but the girls stopped talking and only smiled back. Fake, unfriendly, cutting smiles of the kind Lady Linette had made them perfect over the course of six lessons. Sophronia sighed. *Still not forgiven? But I have such interesting things to tell*.

Then, before breakfast commenced, Mademoiselle Geraldine made a most shocking announcement, one that clearly distressed her.

"Ladies," she said. "We will be taking a trip. A great trip."

A collective gasp met this statement. The girls stopped reaching for crumpets and jam and looked up expectantly.

Sophronia sat back in her seat and looked at Monique out of the corner of her eye. Monique's genuine surprise suggested she hadn't known. Monique had an advocate among the teachers, and yet she hadn't been told? The girl's expression changed from shock to annoyance. *Oh, ho, she thinks she should have been told. Very interesting*.

"You knew." Dimity was giving Sophronia an exasperated look.

Well, at least she's talking to me. Sophronia nodded.

"Of course she knew! She's the best, remember? Better than any of us," Preshea interfered.

Dimity looked away, flushing.

"We are going to…" Mademoiselle Geraldine made an expansive gesture and left a pregnant pause, her stage training in action. "… London!"

Squeals of delight met *that*. Every girl wanted to go to London, even the ones who had been already. The shopping alone!

Sophronia's dining table erupted into hushed exclamations.

"Think of it, town in March!"

"Directly before the Season. All the new gloves will be in!"

"I must write to Mummy and Daddy immediately to ask for an increase in my allowance."

"Will there be balls? Oh, I do hope there will be balls!"

"There *must* be balls."

Sophronia nodded to herself. That explained all the extra fuel. But their school *never* left the moor. The fact that Mademoiselle Geraldine's was actually a massive airship was supposed to be secret. No one would believe it was a real finishing school if they knew it bobbed about shamelessly midair. Sophronia's mind jumped to the problem of staying covert. *Can we avoid populated areas all the way to London?* She ought to be excited.

She'd rarely had an opportunity to visit the capital. But what fun could she have in London if all her girlfriends were angry at her? It was hardly as though she and *Soap* could go tripping about Regent Street cooing over lace tucks.

Mademoiselle Geraldine called for silence. It took a while. "Now, now, ladies. Ladies! There will be plenty of time to talk among yourselves later. It will take us four days to get there. Classes will, of course, continue." The headmistress took a deep breath, straining her stays alarmingly. "And that is not all!"

The girls quieted in anticipation of more delicious news.

"We will be joined by *company* on this excursion." Mademoiselle Geraldine waved at the back of the room. The girls turned in their seats.

The dining hall doors opened and in walked… boys.

Mademoiselle Geraldine's young ladies did not squeal at this, although it was certainly an even more squeal-worthy moment. Their training took over and not a peep was to be heard. But there *was* the faint sucking hiss of multiple indrawn breaths, like helium escaping the big balloons.

Again, Dimity turned to Sophronia, as if she could not help herself. "Did you know about *this*?"

"Dimity!" reprimanded Preshea.

Sophronia had not known, but she wasn't about to tell Dimity *that*. She merely tightened her lips.

"Oh, Sophronia!"

There were some ten young men in all and one teacher. The teacher was a boyish-faced blond gentleman, wearing a seriously scholarly expression.

Sophronia recognized a few of the boys. Dimity's younger brother, Pillover, gave their table a glum nod from under the brim of his oversized bowler. There was the infamous Lord Dingleproops who, outrageously, tipped his hat at them. Dimity blushed and then stuck her nose in the air. Next to Lord Dingleproops walked a pale, dark-haired boy wearing a little kohl about his eyes and possessing a certain sullen restlessness. Sophronia and he had once danced together but had never been properly introduced. She'd had to cut him unkindly at the time, abandoning him alone in the middle of a dance. There had been prototypes and cheese pies to deal with, but he would probably never forgive her.

He caught her staring and held her gaze in a forward manner. Then he

lowered long eyelashes, ridiculously long for a boy, and gave her a small smile.

I know that trick. We learned it our first week here. Sophronia lowered her own lashes at him and glared. Some traitorous part of her was thinking, *At least he doesn't resent me for that dance*.

The boy's smile became genuine and he gave her a little nod.

"Great," muttered Sophronia. "We got us Pistons on board."

"What's wrong with Pistons, Miss Know-It-All?" Monique asked, driven to break her silence. "They come from some of the finest families in England."

"And some of the wealthiest," added Preshea, emphasizing the *t* at the end of the word like a bullet.

Agatha said to Dimity, "Imagine Lord Dingleproops tilting his hat at you! After what he did!"

Monique narrowed in on this. "What did he do?"

Dimity said, "Ask Sophronia, why don't you?"

"Oh, it can't be *that* important."

Mademoiselle Geraldine interrupted further discussion. "Please welcome Mr. Algonquin Shrimpdittle and a selection of the top-ranked students from Bunson and Lacroix's Boys' Polytechnique. They will be joining us for the journey to London. I'm convinced you will make them welcome. Don't fuss; you will get the opportunity to socialize after tea."

The silence that met that remark practically wobbled with excitement, like aspic jelly.

"The young gentlemen will be joining you for some of your lessons. I expect you all to behave and conduct yourselves like the ladies of *qualit-tay* I know you are!"

Another thrilled gasp met this. Mademoiselle Geraldine narrowed her eyes at Lady Linette, as though this were all her idea, and continued, "Now, don't you desire to know *why* we are headed into London?"

Truth be told, most of the girls had entirely forgotten that there need *be* a reason. Sophronia was interested to hear what excuse had been given to Mademoiselle Geraldine. Almost as interested as she was in the truth behind their trip. She turned her gaze away from the boys, now lined up at the front of the room. The abominable dark-haired one was staring at her.

"Henri Giffard is scheduled to float, from France, in the very first

transcontinental dirigible!”

This was of little consequence. After all, they spent all day every day floating about in an overlarge dirigible. Sophronia waited to be impressed.

“And he has said he will do it in under an hour using *aether* currents.”

This was met with pure shock. Even some of the boys looked surprised.

Float *inside* the aetherosphere? Inside the currents that swirled above the air itself? Unheard of!

“Those with the scientific know-how”—Mademoiselle Geraldine gestured at Professors Shrimpdittle and Lefoux—“tell me that he is most likely to succeed due to some exciting new valve technology. It is deemed that such a monumental historical occurrence is worth uprooting our entire establishment to witness in person.”

Sophronia was caught up in the metaphor of *uprooting* a floating school.

“And now, if you gentlemen will take a seat,” the headmistress continued, gesturing to an unoccupied table laid with a damask tablecloth and fine china, “we can get on to breakfast at last.”

Flirting with Conspiracies

The first aether-borne dirigible flight, and we get to witness it! Do you realize, if Giffard's calculations are correct, this could halve float times? Can you believe it? We could get all the way to Scotland in four days! I wonder how he is handling aether-current monitoring. Can you imagine being that high up?"

Sophronia was not as impressed as Vieve thought she should be. "It is still faster by sleeper train."

"Yes, but this is floating. Floating! Using aether currents! The possibilities are endless. It's so exciting!" Vieve bounced up and down on Sophronia's bed.

The young inventor had stopped by for a visit after breakfast. Sophronia had no idea where the scamp ate, but clearly it was within earshot of the assembly.

"As you're here, do you think you could help me dress?" she asked.

"You're dressed already," protested Vieve.

"In something nicer?"

"Not you, too!"

"Well, everyone is putting on her best because of the visitors. I don't want to be known as *that girl in the carriage dress*."

Vieve sighed. "Oh, very well." The ten-year-old eschewed female clothing herself, but she had the French eye for apparel on others, and opinions to go with it. She mooched over to Sophronia's wardrobe and selected a dark blue-and-green plaid, two seasons old, with a narrow skirt.

“This one,” she pronounced with all the authority of youth.

“Really?”

“It complements your eyes.”

“If you say so.”

“With the straw shepherdess bonnet.” Vieve was always very assured on the subject of hats. Not to be trifled with.

“Well, you’ll have to help me put it on. Dimity still isn’t speaking to me.”

“More fool, her. You know what’s happening.”

“Not now; everyone is as up on things as I.” This irritated Sophronia.

Vieve dimpled. “Ah, but you’ll never guess what I heard.”

Sophronia brightened. “Oh?”

“One of the teachers is required in London.”

Sophronia was struck, yet again, by how old Vieve always sounded and acted. One would never have guessed from her speech that she was ten. From her actions, occasionally, yes. She did bounce.

“Which one? Your aunt?”

Vieve shrugged.

“Really, Vieve.”

“Now, now, Sophronia, I told you something interesting, didn’t I? I can’t do all the work.” The girl got distracted. “What *is* Bumbersnoot up to?”

Bumbersnoot had snuffled over to one side of the room and latched onto a froufrou that had fallen into the corner by the bed. He was dragging it out into the center of the floor and not swallowing it into his tiny boiler.

Sophronia looked at her pet. “He wants to come along.”

“What?”

Sophronia indicated the floof in Bumbersnoot’s mouth with her head. Her hands were busy pinning on the shepherdess hat.

Vieve crouched down and gently extracted the bit of cloth from the mechanimal. It turned out to be a complex sort of sling, heavily decorated with lace, ruffles, and tassels. Vieve, being mechanically minded, realized it was designed for Bumbersnoot to wear. It covered most of the mechanimal and made him look like a reticule—if a reticule were to be designed with a metal dog head. If anyone asked, Sophronia was prone to explaining that her handbag was the latest fashion out of Italy, and she couldn’t fathom how a person of taste didn’t also own one.

“Dimity and I made it for him after Petunia’s ball. The idea worked so well there. Everyone thought he was some fancy new accessory. This way I can take him to classes with me. He likes to get out and about on occasion, don’t you, Bumbersnoot?”

Vieve’s eyebrows were raised almost into her dark hair. Bumbersnoot was, technically, illegal. Not only were students of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s not permitted pets, but unregistered mechanimals were forbidden throughout the British Empire.

“Lesson five five four,” said Sophronia. “Sometimes it is best to hide a suspicious item in plain sight.”

“How do you keep him from smoking or steaming unexpectedly?”

Sophronia completed her toilette and turned to look at Bumbersnoot. Vieve had fastened the sling about him using the various ribbons tied into bows. “He has to behave, or he gets brought back to the room. Usually, he’s pretty good. Speaking of which, I’d better get to class.”

“What do you have?”

“Lady Linette’s lesson on hive society.”

“Then there will be boys with you.”

“As opposed to? I thought they were joining us for all our classes.”

Vieve shook her head, green eyes twinkling. “Oh, no, no. Bunson’s doesn’t fraternize with supernaturals.”

“So they won’t be in lessons with Captain Niall or Professor Braithwope?”

Vieve nodded and handed her Bumbersnoot.

“Oh, I don’t know,” hedged Sophronia, “with boys running around. Is it wise to bring him?”

“He wants to go,” insisted Vieve.

Bumbersnoot flapped an ear.

“Very well. Remember, Bumbersnoot, don’t move.” Sophronia slung the mechanimal over her shoulder so that he dangled near her waist, looking for all the world like the oddest and most eccentric bag any lady of means had ever carried.

In class, Dimity, Sidheag, and Agatha noticed the addition of Bumbersnoot

to Sophronia's attire but said nothing. Sophronia only carried the mechanimal when she thought she might *need* him. Although what defined *needing* such a ridiculous creature was anyone's guess. They would assume this was simply another moment when Sophronia knew more than they and intended to show them up.

As if I would do that in front of boys! Sophronia plonked Bumbersnoot down ostentatiously among the other reticules.

Lady Linette's etiquette class was augmented by four boys, including Lord Dingleproops and his dark-haired friend.

Lady Linette began. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Today's class is entitled 'Faking It with Fangs.' We will go over proper introductions within a hive environment. Please pair off."

With six girls, Sophronia and Agatha were left out of the first round. Monique made straight for Lord Dingleproops, cutting Dimity off. Preshea chose the dark-haired boy. They made a fetching pair, of a kind in coloring, pleasing proportions, and sulky temperament. Yet, despite Preshea's uncontested loveliness, the dark-haired boy kept glancing at Sophronia. Which, while complimentary, also gave her an undeniable feeling of smugness. It wasn't often a boy preferred her over Preshea.

Lady Linette continued, "Queens outrank all other vampires, despite whatever landed title they might hold. Always go to the queen first in any social situation and allow one of her hive-bound vampires to introduce you. After the queen come her hive members, then any roves who may be present. All of these will be men, some landed. Drones—humans indentured to hive or rove—are classed as household staff, with a few exceptions."

One of the boys said snidely, "Are you purposefully leaving out the fact that drones are also the vampires' primary food source?"

Lady Linette snapped, "One doesn't discuss such utilitarian things openly! For today's practice, the gentlemen will pretend to be hive vampires. Begin!"

Sophronia and Agatha introduced themselves to each other. Agatha was as shy and as nervous as if Sophronia were a real vampire. The mere presence of four young men among them had her aflutter. Poor Agatha was generally overset by anything new, from the advent of a birthday scarf—How to wear it? What to match it with?—to boys wandering willy-nilly into

classes.

"So unpredictable," Agatha whispered.

The scarf, wondered Sophronia, *or the boys?*

Conversation was allowed to continue for some ten minutes while Lady Linette mingled and made adjustments—to stance, to subject matter, to flirting, to lack of flirting, to eyelash use. She corrected both girls and boys. Sophronia realized, for the first time, that vampires had just as many rules to follow as women in society. Possibly more.

"Pardon me, Lady Linette?"

"Yes, Miss Temminnick?"

"Can rove vampires safely visit a hive? I thought they had to stay in their own territory."

"Roves can visit for short lengths of time. Think logically, Miss Temminnick. Roves must have an alliance with a vampire queen because only a queen can breed new vampires. Since roves have drones, and drones work for the right to try to become a vampire, they must maintain an alliance with a queen. In exchange for drone metamorphosis, roves perform duties for the queen that the males of her hive cannot. Roves, for example, have much longer tethers and greater mobility."

Sophronia decided tether length was something to bother Professor Braithwope about. She found the idea of vampire territories intriguing, but there was very little written on the subject. Since vampires perceived tethers as a weakness, this was probably by design. They did *love* controlling information.

Lady Linette clapped her hands. "Rotate, please. Lady Kingair and Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, you pair out for this round."

Preshea made her way to Lord Dingleproops. The young man was clearly charmed by the girl's precise petty prettiness. Dimity looked disgruntled—she had her embossed missive clutched in one hand and clearly wished to ask Lord Dingleproops about it.

The dark-haired boy made his way across the room to Sophronia, despite the fact that Monique had moved to intercept him. He avoided her with consummate adroitness.

"We meet again, Miss Temminnick."

"To be perfectly correct, *sir,* we have never properly met at all."

He gave a little half smile. "Of course, one must always be correct."

“Oh, haven’t you heard, sir?” Monique said. “Sophronia is *always* correct.”

“Is that your given name, Sophronia? Pretty.”

“Sophronia Temminnick. And it most certainly isn’t pretty. It’s a mouthful. Now, shall we do this properly? Lady Linette is watching.”

“Whatever you like, Ria.”

“Miss Temminnick to you,” hissed Sophronia.

The boy smiled wider. His eyes were a very nice shade of blue. “No, I prefer Ria.” He grasped her hand. His thumb made its way inside the top of her glove to caress her wrist. *Scandalous*.

Sophronia jerked away. “Stop that.” Her heart was racing. *Undoubtedly in anger*.

Lady Linette was upon them. “Show me.”

The dark-haired boy—*I still don’t know his name, pox upon him*—stopped smiling and made a very neat bow to Sophronia, as though he were encountering her at a hive house door.

Lady Linette did not look inspired.

Sophronia executed a near-perfect curtsy in reply, perhaps a little brief.

Lady Linette called her out. “Why so curt, Miss Temminnick?”

“We haven’t been introduced. I wouldn’t want him to get ideas.”

“You wish to discourage the hive? Did I say we were practicing ways to dissuade a vampire’s interest?”

“You did not direct us to focus on encouragement or dissuading.”

“Very well, proceed.”

The dark-haired boy said, “How do you do? My name is Mersey, Felix Mersey.”

Lady Linette interrupted him. “Family names only, young man. What kind of lady do you take her for?”

Felix smiled that quirky half smile. “The best kind, of course.”

Lady Linette was shocked. “Mr. Mersey!”

Lord Dingleproops said, from where he partnered a self-satisfied Preshea, “Actually, my lady, he’s a Golborne.”

Lady Linette was impressed. “Son of the viscount?”

The four boys in the class laughed.

Felix Mersey said softly, “Golborne is a *duchy*, my lady.”

“And Felix here is the eldest,” added Lord Dingleproops.

Lady Linette looked even more impressed, for that meant that Mersey was a landed title, his father's second holding.

Sophronia narrowed her eyes. *Heir to a duke, is he? No wonder he's so arrogant*. The entirety of Monique's attention swung in their direction. Felix Mersey outranked everyone else in the room. *Monique's two years older than him, at the very least. She should be looking for someone her own age!*

"We call him Felix. Doesn't hold with titles, do you, Viscount?"

"A luxury only the titled can afford, I'm sure," said Sophronia.

"Don't worry, Ria," a molasses voice whispered near her ear. "You will call me Felix, regardless."

A fan snapped down between them. "None of *that*! No vampire would ever be so intimate!" Lady Linette did not hold with obvious flirting. Flirting, yes, but not *obvious* flirting.

Felix said, pertly, "I object to having to portray a vampire. It is beneath me."

Lady Linette rolled her eyes and clapped for everyone's attention. "Now, gentlemen, I understand that Bunson's predisposition is against any contact with vampires, but the fact is they pervade high society, and you will have to fraternize with them eventually. It is always better to be prepared. And what better way to understand the enemy than to pretend to be one?"

This mollified Felix. Sophronia wondered at the strength of his dislike. With Professor Braithwope, who was a dear, as her primary model, Sophronia was rather more in favor of vampires than against. She'd been raised relatively progressive. She didn't think her father had any business dealings with vampires or werewolves, but she was tolerably certain he wouldn't be against such a thing.

"How do you do, Lord Mersey?"

"It is a very great pleasure to make your acquaintance at last, Miss Temminnick. Amusing reticule you have." Felix gestured to where Bumbersnoot sat, discarded among the other accessories on Lady Linette's mantelpiece.

"Oh, yes, indeed. A gift from a friend, Italian design. How do you feel about the weather? One might expect rain soon, might one not?"

Lady Linette interrupted, "Weather is only safe with a male vampire. Never discuss the weather with a queen. Since she cannot leave her hive

house, this is considered a rude reminder of her loss of freedom. Lord Mersey, how would a vampire respond?”

“Rain, in your glorious presence, Miss Temminnick? I hardly think it should dare.”

Lady Linette interjected. “No, no, too much flattery. Only roves would be so aggressive. Miss Temminnick, a rebuttal, if you would?”

Sophronia said, “And how are you enjoying your sojourn on board our ship?”

Lady Linette said, “Nicely played, except, of course, no vampire except Professor Braithwope floats. We are pretending that Lord Mersey is a hive-bound vampire. Let us say, instead, that you are both visiting Vauxhall Gardens of an evening.”

Felix’s eyes twinkled at her. “I’m finding myself quite enchanted with… gardens, at the moment.”

Sophronia persisted. “Have you ever visited Vauxhall before?”

“Indeed, but I find this a whole *new* kind of garden experience, now that I have met you.”

Sophronia stepped away from the impossible boy with a glare. “Lady Linette, Lord Mersey is not speaking by the rules. Either for vampires or regular gentlemen.”

“Well, Miss Temminnick, you are using only standard niceties. Examine your subject and tailor your remarks to his taste.”

Given permission, Sophronia took in Felix Golborne, Viscount Mersey, from head to toe. “The mark is of average height and slender build. He is a man of means, but not overly interested in fashion. His hair is a little long. The mark has a slightly sullen expression denoting chronic ennui. Peculiarities include kohl about the eyes, fake gears sewn to the waistcoat, and a top hat with a brass ribbon.” She pointed to the hat where it sat atop an articulated bronze hat rack. “In short, an average hive-bound toff with a few eccentricities.”

Felix looked remarkably nonplussed under this string of observations. “You wound me.”

Lady Linette was delighted. “Note, however, the expense of the haircut? It takes a great deal of money to acquire a look of not having spent any at all. The precise fit and cut of the waistcoat? That is *next* season’s color. We have here a vampire of more than considerable means. He probably has not

only hive backing but his own as well. His eccentricities might lead you to direct the conversation accordingly. Kohl is sourced where?”

Sophronia did not know; cosmetics was not her strong point.

Preshea spoke up. “Oh, me, me!”

“Yes, Miss Buss?”

“Egypt, my lady.”

“Very good, Miss Buss.” Lady Linette turned back to Sophronia. “What might you gather from that?”

“He has business concerns overseas, is possibly a collector of antiquities, or thinks his eyes are so pretty they must be exaggerated, which, given the length of his eyelashes, seems a waste of kohl.”

Lord Dingleproops let out a guffaw. “Got you there, Felix!”

Lady Linette finally realized Sophronia’s antics had distracted the entire class. “Ladies and gentlemen, please return to your own encounters! Sophronia, proceed with your discourse, applying our new information.”

Sophronia sighed and faced Felix. “My lord, are you interested in ancient Egypt?”

“I’m interested in the fact that you noticed the length of my eyelashes.”

Sophronia gritted her teeth. “Does your hive have historic ties to exotic lands?”

Felix’s intense focus on Sophronia was momentarily distracted by the mantelpiece behind her. “Speaking of exotic, your reticule seems to have moved of its own accord.”

Felix was not the only one to have noticed. One of Lady Linette’s cats was a full fluff ball of bristling offense, staring up at Bumbersnoot.

Sophronia hurried over. In the guise of retrieving her shawl, she gave Bumbersnoot an impressive whispered lecture on sitting still. The mechanimal crouched down with a small steam puff of slowing gears. The cat took further offense and hid under a sofa.

“What, for aether’s sake, is wrong with Artemisia?” asked Lady Linette, distracted by her cat’s behavior.

Felix followed Sophronia and leaned in to whisper, “Italian design, did you say? I must see about getting my mother one. Then again, if all the best households have one, she may already be blessed.”

Luckily, shortly after that, they were required to switch partners. Then the class got thoroughly distracted by the spectacle of Dimity Plumleigh-

Teignmott, normally a placid young lady, positively bristling at a surprised Lord Dingleproops. Their vampire-meets-maiden conversation was full of hissed undercurrents. Sophronia observed that when Dimity flashed her letter at the young man, he shook his head violently, not understanding her ire. He was either a very good actor or had no involvement in the fiasco on the squeak deck. Sophronia was relieved that she had interfered and set the airdinghy falling. But if Lord Dingleproops wasn't embroiled, who was? The flywaymen? The Picklemen? How did they get hold of the stationery? And the question still remained, why Dimity?

Sophronia tried to approach her friend after class with her concerns. "Dimity, about that letter…"

Dimity, practically in tears, only brushed by and scuttled off as fast as she could, trailing a worried-looking Agatha and Sidheag in her wake.

Felix, thought Sophronia as she made ready for supper that evening, *is liable to be a problem*. Despite all due attention to deportment, she could not help thinking of him as Felix, even while addressing him as Lord Mersey. They shared several lessons—including tea and delusions with Mademoiselle Geraldine and portion allotment, puddings, and preemptive poisonings with Sister Mattie. He would keep flirting, despite more tempting prospects like Monique and Preshea, who practically hurled themselves in his direction. *I wonder if I should warn him about Preshea. She does so desperately want to murder her first husband*. Sophronia had no idea why Felix was so intent upon her. She had not yet received lessons in seduction, or she might have understood the appeal of sharp confidence, a topping figure, and green eyes. All Sophronia's intellect was directed at something *other* than attracting male companionship. These things combined to make her particularly appealing to gentlemen. Soap could have told her that.

The boys were permitted to take supper with the girls, distributed among the tables. Lord Mersey, Lord Dingleproops, and Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott sat with Sophronia's group because they were the youngest of the gentlemen visitors. Pillover was the youngest of all, at thirteen, and was distressed at having been singled out for special treatment.

“I’m not that good a student,” he confided in Sophronia. “This trip was supposed to be a reward for top evil geniuses. I’ve no idea why Professor Shrimpdittle chose me. It could be because I’m the only one with a sibling on board. What is going on with you and Dimity, by the by? My sister is a raging pain but not the type to snub a friend.”

Sophronia winced. “Set up, I’m afraid. Some kind of test.”

Pillover nodded. “Ah, well, she’ll come around eventually.”

“I certainly hope so. It’s terribly boring without her constant gossip.”

“Really? I don’t miss it at all. You are an odd duck.”

The supper was served—broiled salmon, hashed mutton, potatoes, parsnips, and baked apple pudding. The young men had passable table manners, but conversation was stilted at best, with the young ladies either flirting or nervously silent at the prospect of using the wrong fork.

Despite his best efforts, Felix was not sitting on Sophronia’s left. She sat isolated at the end of the table next to Preshea, who turned to speak with Lord Dingleproops. Pillover was a godsend, sitting across the way, although he would shovel mutton into his maw as if sheep were soon to be obsolete.

“I must say,” he commented between bites, “you eat better at this school than we do.”

“And in greater style, I imagine.”

Pillover looked at the tablecloth and flower centerpiece as though he had not noticed them before, which he probably hadn’t. “Rather.”

“We *are* training to handle such things for the rest of our lives. You are training to be evil geniuses. Table settings and the like are regarded, I am sure, as beneath you.”

“You are disposed to see this as careless?” wondered Pillover.

“Some things are more important than they seem. Note, for example, that by having larger flowers in taller vases, you can prevent people from conversing across the table, thus confining them to their dinner partners. Wider arrangements with cascading ferns, and you might even pass notes or objects to a dining companion without anyone the wiser.”

Pillover looked uninterested. Sophronia switched topics.

“I think someone is after Dimity.”

“Well, despite what she claims about that silly letter, it isn’t Lord Dingleproops. I can tell you that.” Pillover appeared to be aware of the situation.

“Have you had any odd encounters?”

Pillover started. “Me? Who would be after me?”

“Well, who would be after your sister?”

“It must be some kind of lark. Or mistake. I wouldn’t put it past the Pistons.”

Sophronia detailed the events on the squeak deck.

Pillover shook his head. “Can’t be Pistons, not that. Even they don’t have access to an airdinghy. No, I think you’re right that someone else wants my sister.”

“But who?”

Pillover was remarkably unconcerned. “Isn’t that your job?”

“Have you missed the part where she’s not speaking to me?”

Pillover had once been made to wear Sophronia’s petticoats in pursuit of information and safety. This gave him an inflated opinion of her abilities. “You’ll manage.”

“You’ll give it some thought, please?” Sophronia pressed. “I’m a little worried.”

“Well, she is my sister,” Pillover reluctantly agreed.

The meal proceeded, and Sophronia and Pillover conversed civilly, in a manner quite in keeping with training, until the tables were cleared and the cards brought forth.

Given their new numbers, the girls were told that round games were to be played so the entire table might participate. Monique declared that they would play loo and dealt without waiting for a consensus. Since loo was best played with seven, Sophronia, without being asked, and Pillover, who cared not one jot, sat out.

They watched the others play for a while. Felix kept glancing up over his cards at Sophronia.

Finally, she asked Pillover, in a low voice, “What is it with Lord Mersey?”

Pillover’s face darkened, and he shifted in his seat as though it were uncomfortable. “Golborne’s a famously conservative family. Too much money, not enough new blood.”

“Ah, anti-integration?” Sophronia prodded. Some of the aristocrats had fought hard against allowing the supernatural any part of government. That had happened centuries ago, but aristocrats and vampires had long

memories.

“Worse. Picklemen.”

Sophronia stared at Felix. “Really?”

Pillover, whose family was quite progressive, answered sarcastically, “Can’t have monsters taking over the government, can we? We’re *food* to them. You know the propaganda. Fear supernatural creatures! Forget the fact that they won us an empire.”

Sophronia had come around to appreciating both the werewolf Captain Niall and the vampire Professor Braithwope as much as one *could* appreciate teachers. Even if Captain Niall had once accidentally tried to eat her. So she considered herself mostly progressive.

Her attention was diverted by a small, polite cough.

“Vieve?”

“Good evening,” said the scamp, from near her elbow.

Pillover nodded at her. They’d met before, during the incident with the petticoats.

“Listen, Sophronia, Soap says there’s something you might want to see tonight when we leave the moor. And I *know* I want to. I’ll be by with the obstructor later, so you won’t need to climb.” She didn’t wait for Sophronia’s agreement and rabbited off.

“Did you understand any of that?” Pillover asked, in a tone of voice that said he didn’t really care.

“You mean to say, you didn’t?”

“Nor was I meant to. Are you going out this evening, then?”

“Possibly.”

Pillover looked down the table to where Felix was once more staring in their direction. The viscount seemed distressed by the amount of attention Sophronia was bestowing upon Pillover. Since Pillover was customarily the victim of the Pistons’ pranks, he was morosely pleased to be getting under the boy’s skin.

“You want any company?”

“Oh, no, thank you.”

“I wasn’t thinking of myself.”

Sophronia gave him a crafty smile. “Has no one officially warned you boys about Geraldine’s alarms?”

Pillover looked as cagey as a round boy with an obvious stash of apple

fritters could. “Nope. I know from Dimity, of course.”

“In that case, you might mention to Lord Mersey that I’m planning a jaunt later tonight.”

Pillover smiled for the first time in their acquaintance. “I might do that.”

Flirting with Deceit

With the sun firmly down and card games satisfactorily completed, the students went to their next classes. The boys had lessons in mechanics and machinations with Professors Shrimpdittle and Lefoux. The girls, all forty-five of them, trooped down to a lower deck to disembark using the glass platform lift. They had their weekly lesson with Captain Niall. There was a palpable waft of excitement, not to mention perfume, as the werewolf was most every young lady's favorite teacher. He was also, by far, the handsomest.

Sophronia liked him, too, even though she knew the floppy, easygoing military man was a sham. In his werewolf guise, he'd tried to kill her and savaged her best horsehair petticoat instead. He'd been moon-mad at the time, but she'd never quite forgiven the lapse, nor the loss of the petticoat. Like a proper gentleman, the good captain never made mention of the undergarment murder.

The girls stood on the moor. The glass lift turned into a gaslight for evening fighting lessons. Captain Niall strode toward them—a dashing soldier with a beaver-skin top hat tied to his head and a leather greatcoat buttoned from collar to hem. He had a loose way of walking, as if he had temporary, and not very good, control over someone else's legs.

"Ladies, today we leave off knife fighting and move on to the most useful of all skills." The werewolf paused dramatically. The young ladies about him inhaled in anticipation.

"Running away," said Captain Niall with a flourish.

The faces about him were crestfallen; running away was hardly a romantic pursuit. Except when one was running to Gretna Green.

“Now, there are many ways and means to run. Today we will cover escape within a confined area—the fine art of dodging.”

He divided them into groups, naming some rabbits and others wolves. The wolves were each given a short wooden spoon that had been dipped in red gooseberry jelly. They had to tap the bodice of a rabbit to eliminate her from the game. This added incentive for the rabbits to dodge, given that their dresses were about to be covered in jelly. Wolves could only chase assigned rabbits, and rabbits could not work together. Apart from that, they were free to be as creative as they liked.

Sophronia, Sidheag, and Preshea were the rabbits to Monique, Dimity, and Agatha’s wolves. Sophronia was pleased with this arrangement. She was good at running away and saw nothing morally reprehensible in it. She promptly scampered off to a nearby copse and climbed a tree to watch the proceedings.

A game of chaotic tag commenced, with the werewolf teacher moving so quickly among the students he was difficult to see. He yelled instructions and called out rabbits as dead. It soon became clear why Captain Niall had chosen this particular hill. It was littered with obstacles—shrubs, long grasses, the copse of trees, and an occasional boulder.

The game went on for some half an hour until all the rabbits had died and only Sophronia was left. When she was finally found, the wolves refused on principle to climb after her.

“Rabbits can’t climb trees,” objected Monique.

Captain Niall ignored this and gestured Sophronia down. “Ladies, what did Miss Temminnick do correctly?”

“There she goes again,” sniffed Preshea.

Everyone was silent.

Sophronia jumped down. Monique instantly whacked her with her spoon. A great gob of gooseberry stained the front of Sophronia’s dress, and her collarbone stung.

“Ouch,” she objected.

Finally, one of the older girls answered Captain Niall. “She hid?”

“Exactly! If one is hidden, one does not need to run. However, Miss Temminnick, that was not part of the lesson. So, let’s see you try again in a

five-minute fray.” He pointed to three older girls Sophronia knew only by sight. “You’re the wolves. Begin!”

All three charged Sophronia, holding out their jelly-covered spoons. Sophronia dove to one side and broke sharply outside of spoon range. She hiked up her skirts, leapt over a shrub, and made for the high ground. One of the wolves got her dress caught in the shrub and tripped, falling to the side. The two others followed. Sophronia dashed to a boulder, scrabbling for the top.

The wolves did not coordinate or they would have had her easily. Instead, they each came after her alone. Sophronia kicked, which was considered quite shocking in a gentlewoman, but with her skirts hiked it gave her enough reach to stay out of spoon range. It was so unexpected the first wolf fell backward down the hill, her gooseberry jelly never even touching Sophronia’s leg.

Sophronia managed to push the last wolf away as the older girl went for her bodice. The wolf almost managed, but Sophronia twisted at the last minute and then, with a tremendous heave, leapt forward over her fallen opponent to land down the hill on the opposite side. She skidded around and took refuge behind a very spiky bush.

Sophronia was panting from the exertion, but still alive. She had a brief moment of elation, and then a wolf came to flush her out. *Should have named this game fox and hound*, thought Sophronia, bending double to avoid the jelly-covered spoon and charging her enemy headfirst. Surprised by a frontal attack, the other girl fell backward into a prickly briar.

Captain Niall called time.

“Interesting, Miss Temminnick. Ladies, what do you think?” He turned to the row of watching students.

“She showed her legs by hiking her skirts.”

“She kicked!”

“She charged with her head! Like a bull.”

“It was all very embarrassing.”

Sophronia stood at Captain Niall’s side and crossed her arms, panting. Certainly, she had conducted herself like neither a lady nor a rabbit, but Captain Niall hadn’t given them any particular rules about conduct, except to survive. She had survived, hadn’t she?

Captain Niall appeared to agree. “Miss Temminnick sought the high

ground, a strategic choice if you know the number of opponents. Remember, however, that if there is a chance of reinforcements, the high ground exposes you to projectiles. Now, ladies, please jelly up your spoons and switch roles. Those who were rabbits are now wolves."

Sophronia saw Dimity lick her spoon surreptitiously before passing it on. Dimity was awfully fond of gooseberries.

So it went, switching back and forth, rearranging rabbits versus wolves, until all were exhausted. By the end, everyone, even Sophronia, had died several jelly deaths. Dimity enacted a dramatic Shakespearean soliloquy at the combined spooning of Agatha and Preshea to a round of polite applause.

After two strenuous hours, with the girls all sore in the calf and blistered in the toe, the captain called a halt. They lined up to be lifted, in groups of five, aboard the airship. Sophronia was pushed to the back because she was being given the cold shoulder by nearly everyone. Sidheag, however, was hanging back intentionally, edging toward Captain Niall.

Sophronia faded into the darkness, pretending to have dropped her reticule.

"Sir, may I ask a word of advice?" Sidheag curtsied, bending her head too far forward.

"About the game, Lady Kingair?" Captain Niall gestured for her to rise.

"No, sir, it is a matter of pack. Things are unsettled in Kingair. I think *he* may be losing control."

"He is one of the strongest Alphas in England." Captain Niall smiled as though alluding to a shared joke. "There are some who would say even the queen's own werewolf would lose three out of five challenges to your grandfather."

"It's not his strength I question; it's the behavior of the rest of the pack."

"They *are* Scottish."

"But never have they been this angry."

"Perhaps it's the Giffard dirigible run. If there is even the possibility he could open the aetherosphere up to vampires, even if it's only roves…" Captain Niall trailed off.

Sidheag filled in the rest. "Then werewolves have a right to be worried."

Sophronia puzzled over this. It must have something to do with tethers. Currently, one of the greatest checks on vampire power was the fact that it was limited to specific territories. The more powerful the vampire, the more

confined the territory. Werewolves, on the other hand, had a greater range, since their tether was to other members of the pack, rather than an exact location. This was how England had won an empire abroad; packs could fight in armies. *Is there something about this dirigible flight that could change that dynamic? That's far more significant than Vieve's claims of shorter travel times. Vampires could be as mobile as werewolves if they tethered to aetherosphere-going dirigibles, possibly more so*.

"I've always wondered why Professor Braithwope was the only floating vampire," said Sidheag.

"He's a bit of an experiment."

Considering the vampire teacher's silly mustache, Sophronia thought, *Not only in that way. Are the vampires hoping to experiment further with Giffard's new technology? Is someone trying to stop them?* Vampires, to Sophronia, were mainly a concept rather than a practice—she hadn't much experience with them. But she found the concept more palatable when she knew there were limits to their supernatural abilities. The werewolves, she must assume from this conversation, felt the same.

Sidheag said, "Do we consider the professor a successful experiment?"

Captain Niall touched the tall girl affectionately on one shoulder. "You know I can't tell you that."

"Of course." Sidheag pressed one long finger to her mouth. Then, glancing around, she said, "Oh, dear, it looks like I'm the last." The glass platform waited for her, so low Sidheag need only step up onto it.

"Not entirely. Miss Temminnick?" Captain Niall turned into the darkness to where Sophronia skulked.

She moved forward, not at all ashamed. This was, after all, what they were trained for. "Did you smell me or hear me?"

"Both. Even you cannot quiet your own heartbeat. And, as you have been told before, perfume will always work against you with the supernatural, unless you have scattered it everywhere."

Sidheag, at least, seemed gratifyingly surprised to see her.

"What did you hear?" she hissed as Sophronia stepped up onto the platform next to her.

"Enough."

"That's personal pack business!"

"And I won't mention any of it if you tell me everything you know

about this possible vampire plot."

"I can't be *seen* talking to you." The platform rose slowly toward the underbelly of the airship. At the same time, the massive craft lifted higher into the sky.

"Then you had better do it fast."

"Has anyone ever told you you're awful contrary, Sophronia?"

"Frequently. Now explain."

"It seems the werewolves think the vampires are trying to master aetherosphere travel for themselves. There are rumors Giffard's been funded by vampire backers. Even though he's French."

Sophronia's mind whirled at the implications. "Is our school floating to town to support or fight this possibility?"

"I've no idea."

"How do our visiting boys figure into this?"

Sidheag shrugged. "Bunson's is pro Picklemen."

Sophronia nodded. "And the Picklemen will want to control any aetherosphere travel for themselves." She was thinking about the prototype kerfuffle at her sister's ball. Both the government and the Picklemen had been after the technology then. "No wonder we are floating to town."

"You think there's going to be some kind of contest for control?" Sidheag nibbled her lips. The werewolves, as a rule, were uninterested in advancements in science that did not pertain to munitions. Sidheag had not been raised to think in terms of patent control or manipulation of technological discoveries.

Sophronia said, "I'm not sure what I think yet, but that seems likely."

It was far easier to get around the ship with Vieve. Sophronia didn't have to climb the exterior to avoid patrolling mechanicals. Vieve had an invention of her own devising, the obstructor, which froze a mechanical in its tracks long enough for two girls to slide around it.

They sped through the central student section and then into the forbidden section. Dangling red tassels all around demarcated the highly restricted forward segment of the ship, which included the teachers' quarters, the record room, and… the boiler room. Everything was going

smoothly, even the most dangerous part: passing the doors of slumbering teachers.

Then a loud whistle reverberated through the airship, picked up and repeated by every mechanical within range. They hadn't had to use the obstructor for two hallways, so it couldn't have been their fault. The alarm was triggered by some other miscreants out after hours.

The two girls squeezed behind a massive marble bust of Pan and a once-underdressed nymph in the corner. The nymph had been clothed in skirts and a lace hat, to make her more the thing. This meant there was plenty of room for concealment. Just in time, too, for doors to teachers' rooms popped open and heads stuck out.

"Is there no peace for the naked?" Sister Mattie wore a bed cap of sensible white lace.

"I think you mean peace for *the wicked*," corrected Lady Linette, wrapped in a voluminous silk robe of apple green trimmed in black velvet. Her hair was loose and flowing, her face free of paint. She looked lovely and fresh.

"Why would that apply?" asked Sister Mattie, before closing her door on both the problem and the noise.

"What's going on?" The headmistress voiced that query, her rinsed red hair crowned by a great pink floof of crochet.

"I shouldn't worry, Geraldine. It's probably our young gentlemen guests."

"I warned you no good would come of having boys on board!"

"Might have told that to me, mum, whot?" joked Professor Braithwope, shimmering out of his room fully clothed and dapper. His mustache was a fluffy caterpillar of curiosity, perched and ready to inquire, dragging the vampire along behind it on the investigation.

"Oh, Professor," simpered Mademoiselle Geraldine, "you don't count. You're a *gentleman*, not a boy, and *qualit-tay* to boot."

The vampire looked around the hallway, noting no mechanicals or culprits who might have set the alarm. He was the only one dressed, his boots mirror shiny and his trousers cut to perfection. Sophronia wondered how such a nobby little man could manage to fade to the background so often. It was a real skill.

"Where's the revolution?"

“Student quarters, I suspect. One of the boys. Our girls know better than to risk it at night. Or they know how to avoid setting off alarms.” Sophronia could have sworn Lady Linette glanced in their direction.

The vampire nodded. “I’ll see to it, being as I’m all gussied up and proper for public consumption. Plus, put a bit of fear into those monkeys, wrath of a vampire, whot?”

“A most excellent notion, Professor.”

Sophronia, forgetting her own first encounter with the vampire, suppressed a giggle at the very idea of Professor Braithwope, with his quizzical mustache and undersized frame, putting the fear into anyone—except perhaps the fear of growing the wrong facial hair.

The alarm, painfully loud, continued. There was no maid nearby to receive shutdown protocols. Professor Braithwope hurried off, and the other teachers disappeared into their rooms, presumably to hide from the noise.

Sophronia and Vieve continued on their way, reassured that attention was directed elsewhere.

“What was that about?” Vieve wondered.

“Viscount Mersey might have taken something Pillover said after dinner as encouragement.”

“Sophronia, you didn’t plant ideas in that poor nobleman’s head? You are a naughty girl.”

“Where’s your aunt? I didn’t see her just now.”

“Down in the laboratory with Shrimpdittle, I think. They’re working on something together, despite bad blood over the prototype.”

“Is that the real reason the boys are on board, as cover for this project?”

“Possibly.”

“Vieve,” said Sophronia slowly, “how would vampires handle floating through the aetherosphere?”

“I’ve no idea. Ah, here we are.”

When entering the engineering chamber from the proper door, rather than the outside hatch, they came in from above onto a wide landing with the whole of the massive room spread out before them. Sophronia loved the view. It was so impressive, with multiple boilers flaming and smoking,

engines and machines moving and sparking, sooties running between massive mounds of coal. Usually, two-thirds of the sooties slept during evening shift, but tonight everyone was awake. A full complement of supervisors stood guard—firemen, greasers, engineers, and coal runners. *Something is definitely afoot. Or should one say "a soot"?*

Sophronia and Vieve, unnoticed, made their way down the spiral staircase and through the crowds to the far corner of the room, ending up behind the coal pile that had long since become their regular meeting spot.

Soap was waiting, fairly vibrating with anticipation.

"What took you so long?"

"Someone set off the alarm."

"Not you two? Never you two." Soap's faith was endearing.

"Course not. Sophronia set up a patsy to take the fall."

Soap swung to look at her.

Sophronia smiled slyly. "What can I say? Boys need lessons sometimes."

Soap arched an eyebrow at her.

"Not you, Soap. You're not a *real* boy. But Felix is being difficult."

"Felix, is it?" Soap did not look pleased.

"Lord Mersey, I mean," Sophronia corrected herself.

Soap looked even less pleased.

Sophronia didn't quite understand where she'd gone wrong. Soap was usually such a good-natured chap. She changed the subject. "So, what's the surprise?"

Soap brightened. "We're going undercover for the next three days. Weather not being obliging."

"What do you mean? It's been lovely for March."

"Just so. We can't go sailing to London all visible. So they brought out the steam machine. We're going *to white*!"

"Well, that explains all the extra water that tube took on."

"You saw that?" Soap looked away from Sophronia. "What else did you see?"

Sophronia tried to look more mysterious than embarrassed.

Vieve was not interested in innuendo—a *new machine* was about to be cranked up! "I've heard about it but never seen it in action."

"I've only helped do it twice before," said Soap. "Come watch." He led

them to sit atop a pile of coal. “Don’t interfere!” He shook a finger at Vieve.

The sooties wheeled out a massive apparatus, one that usually huddled at the back of the room. They arranged it to sit straddling the distribution hatch—a massive opening used to bring in coal and shovel out ash.

The contraption was hooked up to boilers and attached to a complex series of metal tubes, springs, and gears, the range of which charmed Vieve.

“Oh my goodness, is that an electrosplit goopslimer port? I do believe it is. And is *that* a Thrushbotham pip-monger swizzle sprocket? Oh, *two* swizzle sprockets!” Vieve was practically squeaking in excitement.

The machine was cranked up and began to puff.

Never before had Sophronia seen such a massive amount of steam at once. The boiler room filled with hot white moisture. All her curls fell flat—Mademoiselle Geraldine would be so upset.

There was a great deal of yelling and some crashing, and then the sooties had the device corked up. All the steam, one must presume, was now flowing outside the ship.

Soap sauntered over, hands deep in his pockets. The soot on his face was clumped and spotty from the steam, and he looked inordinately pleased with himself.

“Wanna see?”

“Of course!” said Sophronia and Vieve in unison.

Soap helped Sophronia down, and she was shocked by how large and strong his hand was. He led the way over to the small hatch Sophronia used on her solo visits.

They stuck their heads out and saw… nothing. Only white.

“We are our own cloud! Ingenious.” Sophronia was impressed. “And it will hold day or night, despite temperature shifts?”

“Of course!” Soap took this questioning as doubt of his own actions and integrity. “Designed by Professor Lefoux, this was! She don’t make mistakes, that one. Except bringing this bit of trouble on board.” Soap pulled off Vieve’s cap and ruffled her hair.

Vieve swatted him.

Sophronia nodded. “Thank you, Soap. This has been most entertaining. But we should be getting on.” She was profoundly relieved. *At least for a while Dimity will be safe from attack. No one will be able to find her*.

Soap looked surprised; normally Sophronia lingered. “You should?

Right, then." He led them back to the staircase. Vieve scampered up, but before Sophronia could follow, Soap touched her arm. "Who is this Felix chap?"

"Just an impossible boy. I shouldn't let him bother you."

"You need me to teach him any lessons? A little boxing 'round the ears?"

"That's very kind, Soap, but I can fight my own battles."

"I don't like you fraternizing with boys. Ain't normal."

Sophronia quirked her head in amusement. "No? And here I was thinking that's how society worked. Might as well learn the way of it."

"Oh, you believe so?" Soap leaned in. Even though she stood on the first step, the sootie towered over her. He smelled of wet coal and engine oil. It must be quite strong, as it seemed to be affecting her breathing. He leaned in, his normally cheerful face quite serious. "I could teach you a bit."

He was so close, Sophronia thought for one delusional moment that he intended to actually kiss her on the mouth! *Imagine that? Soap!* Instead he reached for her arm, the exposed piece between glove and sleeve where his filthy hand would not soil her dress. He raised it to his face and kissed her just there, his lips impossibly soft.

Sophronia froze. *But I don't think of Soap like that* was her first reaction, and then she felt a tiny bit of annoyance. *Why would he want to complicate our friendship?* And then caution. *It's up to me to ensure he doesn't.*

She recovered her powers of movement and extracted her arm gently. She decided to take his overture as a jest, a mockery of polite society, and laugh it off. "Oh, Soap, you *are* silly."

Jaunty Soap was instantly back. "See what I mean? I can teach you."

"Very gallant," Sophronia said, smiling and backing up, almost tripping over the next step up. *Look at me, made clumsy by a sootie!* "It's not exactly the lesson I need, however."

"I'm thinking it's the same kind of lesson this Felix is after."

Feeling she had entirely lost control of the conversation, Sophronia did as Captain Niall had so recently instructed; she ran away.

When Sophronia caught up to Vieve, the girl was trotting purposefully

down the hall, obstructor at the ready. It was proving unnecessary, as the mechanicals had all been diverted elsewhere. Probably to monitor the boys.

“Can we swing by your aunt’s classroom on our way back?”

“Need something?” Vieve’s mind ever jumped to supplies.

“No. Didn’t you say your aunt and the visiting professor were holed up there?”

“You want to see what they are up to?” Vieve changed course and headed toward the teaching area outside the tassel zone, rather than across to the student residences. Soon, they found themselves at the classrooms. The dark hallway was lit only by a small beam of light emanating from the crack under Professor Lefoux’s lab door.

Sophronia went for Sister Mattie’s room.

Vieve, confused, followed.

Sister Mattie never locked her door. She maintained that if a student needed to pollute, cure, or improve nutritional health, she should do so with impunity. Or, as she put it, “One woman’s petunia is another one’s poison.”

Sister Mattie’s classroom abutted Professor Lefoux’s. Sophronia made her way through it in the dark. This was not difficult, as she knew which plants were thorny and which were sticky. She ended up behind the rubber tree, where a small door let out onto a balcony covered in large pots of rhubarb and tomatoes, alongside foxgloves and rhododendrons. Sophronia brushed through, mindful that tomato leaves would deposit telltale yellow streaks on her dress. She climbed up and balanced precariously on the railing so she could lean over to the small round window of Professor Lefoux’s lab.

She peeked inside. Under bright gas lighting, Professor Lefoux and Professor Shrimpdittle stood together over a large table spread with the parts of some disassembled apparatus. They were not working on the gadget. They were arguing. Sophronia fished in her reticule and brought forth her latest prized acquisition, an ear trumpet. It had taken a good many letters to persuade her mother that she was losing her hearing and in desperate need of the medical device. It was invaluable for eavesdropping, and she’d decorated it to look like a morning glory flower. She pressed the flared end to the glass and the nozzle to her ear.

“… needs to be done!” Professor Lefoux was saying. Her words were almost indecipherable, her French accent was so strong.

“That’s ridiculous. Breathing is irrelevant!” Shrimpdittle objected. His voice was one of upper-crust education, all toffy-nosed and toothy.

A knock sounded at the door.

Professor Lefoux went to open it.

Monique de Pelouse came inside. *Holy smokes!* thought Sophronia. *What’s she doing here?* She whispered to Vieve, “Monique’s turned up. I thought she was in disgrace. Why on earth would they let her wander around after hours?” Sophronia felt unsettled, possibly even a little jealous. Monique knew more about what was going on than she did!

The professors were obviously expecting Monique. For a moment, Sophronia wondered if the dismembered gadget was meant for her.

“I’m to ask if it’s ready,” the blonde said. “Is it?”

“Not yet,” Professor Lefoux answered.

With no further exchange, Monique pirouetted to leave.

“One moment, Miss Pelouse. Was that you who set off the alarm?”

Monique stuck her nose in the air. “Of course not. I have permission to be out. You know that; you gave it to me.” She gestured rudely with her thumb at Professor Shrimpdittle. “A couple of his charges thought it’d be fun to sneak out.”

Professor Shrimpdittle looked contrite. “Oh, dear. I do hope Lady Linette isn’t upset.”

Monique smiled evilly. “Not at all. She sent Professor Braithwope to handle the matter, knowing how little Bunson’s cares for vampires.” With that, she let herself back out of the room.

Professor Shrimpdittle whirled on Professor Lefoux. “If your bloodsucker has harmed one hair on any of my boys’ heads!”

“Professor Braithwope is a perfectly respectable teacher. Your boys should not have been out! You were told. *They* were told!”

“I wager they only did it because your girls taunted them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Algonquin. It’s what boys do!”

“Who’s he feeding from? That’s what I want to know.”

“As if I should inquire into your personal life and diet!”

“Who is his drone?”

Sophronia perked up. This was a question that troubled her on a regular basis.

“None of your concern!”

“I think it is my concern, with my boys on board! What if he goes for one of them?”

“Professor Braithwope is a gentleman! Not to mention a vampire. He never goes anywhere without proper invitation. You should know that! His kind invented the concept!”

“Well! I like that.” Professor Shrimpdittle’s tone clearly said that he didn’t.

“So you should! Would you rather our school were so deep in the Picklemen’s keep we couldn’t claw ourselves away… like you? Going to sell this invention to them to keep it out of vampire hands? Or are they still after the valve?”

Sophronia hissed back to Vieve, “I think that mini crystalline valve frequensor is involved.”

Vieve’s eyes shone. “I’ve been researching that. The one you gave me, I think—”

Sophronia held up a hand, back to eavesdropping.

Professor Shrimpdittle said, “This is getting us nowhere. Perhaps we should stop for the night?”

“I think that’s a capital idea.” Professor Lefoux was struggling to control her emotions.

Until that moment, Sophronia would have said the austere teacher didn’t have emotions.

“You should examine your loyalties, Beatrice. Someday you will have to choose.” Sophronia could hear the slamming of books as Shrimpdittle packed.

“Choose?”

“Between science and the supernatural.”

“I wasn’t aware they were on opposite sides.”

Sophronia heard the door slam.

“Oh, that man!” Professor Lefoux exclaimed in French to the empty room. Then there was silence.

Sophronia peeked through the window. The teacher was cleaning up the apparatus on the table, systematically putting everything away.

Sophronia signaled Vieve.

“Take a look,” she whispered, making room on the railing and assisting the smaller girl to look in. “What do you make of those parts?”

Vieve didn’t answer, face pressed to the glass, until the gas in the room was turned off and the interior black.

She swung her weight back and slid down off the railing. Sophronia followed.

“I don’t know. It looks almost like armor, but for what? Undersea exploration?”

“Perhaps it has to do with our trip? Perhaps we’re going to London because of your aunt or Professor Shrimpdittle and this invention.”

Vieve considered. “It’s possible. It’d explain why they need the whole school—access to my aunt’s laboratory.”

“You were saying about the valve?”

“That one you gave me, I have to run further tests. But I don’t see how it can affect mechanicals or the oddgob.”

“Keep at it, will you?”

“Until I get caught or something more interesting comes along.”

Sophronia patted her friend on the head in the manner of Soap, a thing she knew the girl found particularly annoying. “Good little inventor.”

Garnering Invitations

The girls entered the breakfast room to find the postal steward calling names and passing out correspondences. Since they had gone to white, Captain Niall must have undertaken a run back to Swiffle-on-Exe to retrieve missives. The teachers were always saying that the captain was not an errand boy at the beck and call of young ladies' whims, but on occasion he did perform groundside services made convenient by his land-bound state and supernatural speed.

There was nothing for Sophronia, who sat bleary-eyed and exhausted at the end of the table while the other girls exclaimed. Her fellows exhibited new trinkets to their male dining companions and shared the latest gossip from home. It was an orgy of batted eyelashes, and Sophronia was finding herself unable to cope with fluttering on only a few hours' sleep.

Felix Mersey ostentatiously picked up his place setting and moved it next to hers. "What's wrong, pretty Ria? You seem to have lost your customary aloofness."

"Oh, do go away. I'm not up to dalliance this morning."

He pouted at her. "Is that all I am to you? A plaything, a speck of dust on a sunbeam, a bit of dandelion fluff on the breeze?"

"Yes, that's it exactly." Sophronia hid a smile at such silliness. *No sense encouraging the blighter*.

"Hard-hearted, that's what you are."

"You're an imbecile, you do realize?"

Any further conversation was interrupted, as it was surely meant to be,

by a squeal from Monique. It was emitted upon reading a gold-embossed letter and caught even Mademoiselle Geraldine's attention from the head table.

Felix moved hastily out of indiscreet proximity to Sophronia.

"Miss Pelouse, have you something of note to share with the assembly?" wondered the headmistress.

The blonde girl stood gracefully, glancing over the entire room with a beneficent smile. She looked like a queen addressing her subjects, holding her gold missive in one hand as though an award received from on high. Her dress that morning was of royal blue with butter-lemon stripes, a row of gold pom-poms down the front in increasing size. It was almost as though it were intended to match the letter.

"Nothing of any consequence, Headmistress," she said, blushing prettily. "It's only that my dear mama has informed me that she intends to hold my coming-out ball when we arrive in town!"

Pandemonium reigned. The announcement of a trip to London had been one thing, and the presence of boys another, but this was the Thing to End All Things—a ball!

A breakfast selection of German sausage, broiled kidney, dried salmon, and muttonchops arrived, but few registered it. Some of the young ladies even ate the salmon without concern to vital humors—when everyone knew colored fish flesh could bring on an attack of hysteria.

Sophronia refused to be ruffled. She ate the same thing every morning: porridge.

Girls began to find excuses to call at Monique's table to compliment the horrid girl on the cut of her dress or the size of her pom-poms, angling for an invitation.

"What lovely earrings, Monique."

"Yes, aren't they pretty? My father purchased them in Spain. Such an expense for little me!"

"Did you do your hair differently this morning, Monique?"

"No, but it is looking quite shiny, isn't it?"

Pillover glanced up from his plate of sausage. "What a revolting spectacle."

Sophronia privately agreed and contemplated breaking from her normal dietary routine and eating a sausage in order to cope.

Monique, mistress of the British Empire at that moment, seemed willing to gratify all sycophants. Most of the older girls, cronies of hers, were told right off that of course she could not do without them in attendance. A few of the middle girls were told they might be allowed in, but the debuts—who shared her table and chambers—were left in suspense.

Preshea, at Monique's right hand, smirked, anticipating an invite. "Can I pass you the butter, Monique? Would you care for a little more tea, Monique?"

Agatha looked terrified and Sidheag indifferent; they'd rather not be invited. Dimity kept glancing in Sophronia's direction as if she wished they were on speaking terms so they could discuss this new kink in the workings of life.

Lord Dingleproops, Monique's dining companion, paid her marked attention—to her evident enjoyment. Sophronia felt sorry for Dimity. Whatever false hopes he had once given her must now be crushed.

The ordeal of breakfast eventually ended. As they rose and made their way toward the exit, Sophronia snaked up behind her erstwhile best friend and whispered, "I shouldn't be too upset. Lady Dimity Dingleproops sounds quite ridiculous, anyway."

Dimity smothered a giggle and turned, eyes animated, prepared for a bit of a gossip—in that instant all ill feelings were forgotten. But Agatha, of all people, swooped in and linked arms with Dimity, practically dragging her away down the hall.

Through the course of that day, Monique became increasingly intolerable. She had Preshea and others running errands for her, bringing her little gifts. She would send one girl off and then make some snide comment about the poor thing's appearance and lack of funds. Then she was all sugar when the girl returned, bearing a posy of violets or glass of barley water.

By the time Professor Braithwope's etiquette class rolled around after sunset, everyone was beginning to show strain. The boys escorted the girls to the vampire's door, but they had a lesson with Professor Shrimpdittle instead. Their presence made Monique worse. She latched herself onto Felix's arm when he tried to leave her.

“Abandoning me to monsters, my lord?”

Felix chuckled. “Now, now, Miss Monique, I’m not so bad as all that. I never said they were monsters, only predators.”

“You’re so wise,” simpered Monique, still clutching.

Lady Linette paused in the hallway at the sight. “Miss Pelouse! How can you be so forward? Have you learned nothing? Lord Mersey, let go of her this instant!”

Felix lounged against the wall insolently, still attached to Monique. “I’m afraid, my lady, you must persuade *her* to let go of *me*.”

“It’s my ankle, Lady Linette. It’s feeling poorly,” professed Monique.

“Oh, does it? Should I send you to matron?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t trouble yourself. It isn’t that bad.”

“I’m certain it isn’t. Now, let go of the young viscount this moment and behave like a proper lady!”

Monique, pouting prettily, let go of Felix and marched into the vampire’s classroom with no sign of a limp. Felix made good his escape with a wink at Sophronia. Sophronia, smiling at both the rebuke and the wink, followed Monique.

Monique sat down on a fainting couch next to Preshea, and before anyone else could take the opportunity, Sophronia sat down on her other side. She wasn’t really planning anything; she only wanted to make the older girl uncomfortable.

Monique didn’t register Sophronia at first, engaged in an animated discussion with Preshea. The topic appeared to be Lord Dingleproops’s chin and whether its absence was all that important to the state of the Empire. When she turned to her left to find Sophronia sitting there primly, Monique twitched and made as if to rise.

But Professor Braithwope started class, so the blonde contented herself with turning her back on Sophronia. Sophronia had Bumbersnoot the reticule with her and placed him on the carpet behind her feet, well concealed by copious skirts.

If asked afterward, she would have explained that there was no *technical* way to train a mechanical into any action outside its initial basic protocols. So it must have been without her knowledge that Bumbersnoot made his way from her skirts to Monique’s. She could never have known he would belch steam up the older girl’s drawers and deposit a pile of ash on her very

expensive pink kid slippers. *Never have known*.

Monique got the most peculiar expression on her face and let out a muffled squawk.

She leapt to her feet and turned to glare at the obvious culprit. “Sophronia!”

Realizing that Bumbersnoot must have done something, Sophronia used her foot to shift him back to his starting position behind her own skirts and looked up innocently at the raging Monique.

Professor Braithwope whirled from where he was demonstrating entering and exiting a hive house with grace and concealed weaponry. He’d been using an arrangement of unstable top-hat boxes as steps and was not happy at being distracted. The act of whirling caused him to go through the side of one of the hatboxes in a manner most clumsy for a vampire.

“Sit down this moment, Miss Pelouse!” he barked.

“But Sophronia squirted steam up my drawers!”

Dimity let out an uncontrolled giggle. The others in the class looked either surprised or amused, according to their nature.

“Whot, whot? I hardly see how she might have done that. She hasn’t moved.”

Monique sputtered. Then, knowing she could not defend herself to the teacher, she sat back down and hissed in Sophronia’s ear. “You certainly won’t be invited to my ball!”

Sophronia smiled. “My dear Monique, I never for one moment believed that I would.”

“Unnatural girl!” Monique turned to glare across the room at Dimity, who had one gloved hand pressed to her mouth and dancing eyes.

“And you! Why would I let you come, either? Who are *your* parents? Nothing more than scientists who can’t decide which side they’re on. Not to mention the way you dress, like some market doxy!”

Dimity’s eyes instantly filled with tears, and she let out a whimper, mouth still hidden under her hand.

Sophronia sprang to Dimity’s defense. “As opposed to an eighteen-year-old girl who is only *now* having her coming-out ball, who failed to finish properly, and whose parents are quite probably in *trade*?”

All the girls in the room gasped. Even Professor Braithwope was rendered momentarily speechless by such cutting remarks.

The vampire recovered his power of speech. “Ladies! Manners, whot?”

Dimity mouthed “Thank you” at Sophronia, which earned her a harsh look from the vampire.

After that, class settled down, but something in the atmosphere had changed. As the class practiced walking up and down hatboxes, swinging skirts to conceal weapons in as elegant a manner as possible, Dimity came to stand firmly next to Sophronia.

Professor Braithwope noticed and was perturbed, but he continued the lesson. “Any vampire may be addressed properly as ‘venerable one.’ Alternatively, you may use his title, if an aristocrat. All queens have titles; they are given a baronetcy if not already holding, although that has not been necessary for centuries. Very few women survive being bitten, so rarely is there a new queen. This is why there are always fewer female drones than males.”

Sidheag raised her hand at that and asked, “Why bother?”

“Whot? Oh, to be a female drone? Well, the reward is unparalleled. Aside from immortality, if a woman survives metamorphosis, she is automatically a queen. But there are other reasons, before the bite. Drones are protected, fed, and cared for by their vampire. After a period of menial service, they are given patronage to pursue their own desires. Vampires tend to be wealthy and powerful, so they make very good *friends*, whot. There are drawbacks, of course.” The professor touched his own neck, hidden under the high collar.

After prancing up and down the stacked hatboxes several more times, Sophronia decided she could risk one more inquiry. “Could you tell us a little something about tethers, Professor?”

Professor Braithwope considered both Sophronia and her question. “Tethers, whot? Very well, I will indulge in a digression, but only because you’ll never understand vampire etiquette if you don’t understand our limitations. Queens cannot leave their hive house, and hive-bound vampires cannot leave the vicinity of their queen. How far they can go depends mainly on age, but it’s generally no more than a borough. Rove vampires usually have the range of an entire city, but they also remain tethered to their home. They will not stray into a hive’s territory unless invited and never enter a hive house unless they have petitioned for one of their drones to be bitten by its queen.”

Sophronia prodded further; she was wildly curious. “How does this work for you, Professor?”

“I am tethered to this ship, but I can leave it to walk around the moor.”

She pressed. “Are there other vampires tethered to airships?”

“No, we are social creatures, and mine is now such a solitary life. None have followed my example. Although you ladies make it interesting, whot.”

“What about your drones?”

“Ah, now, ladies. This brings us back to etiquette, and the purpose of this lesson. It is rude to ask after a vampire’s drones, either in courtesy or curiosity. Drones are a bit of an embarrassment. After all, you would not ask a lady about the nature and quality of her pantry, would you?”

All the girls in the class shook their heads emphatically.

The vampire turned cold eyes on Sophronia, his mustache stiff with accusation. “Anything *else*, Miss Temminnick?”

“What happens when a vampire goes beyond the limit of his tether?” Sophronia knew she was pushing the bounds of propriety.

Professor Braithwope paled and stilled. If a vampire could be said to go pale. Sophronia hoped never again to see a teacher whom she respected look so frightened.

The room hushed. Normally the vampire was such an easygoing teacher. Even Monique looked up, her coming-out ball forgotten for one brief moment.

Eventually he said, “Nothing good, Miss Temminnick.”

Class ended, and the girls gathered up their reticules, hats, parasols, and shawls in subdued silence. Dimity held back when the others left and waylaid Sophronia with a hand on her arm.

“Professor Braithwope, might I have a private word?” she asked their teacher once the room cleared. “Sophronia, please stay, this concerns you.”

“Yes, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. How may I help?”

“It’s this matter of our orders from Lady Linette. You’re aware of them?”

The vampire looked back and forth between the two girls and then nodded.

“Well, I’m not going to do it anymore. Sophronia is my friend and it isn’t fair.”

“Intelligencers don’t play fair, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott,” he replied.

“Well, then I’m no intelligencer of merit. You may send me down, if you like. I always felt I was ill suited to this lifestyle, despite my parents. I’d rather be loyal than right.”

Professor Braithwope smiled, showing fang. “Very interesting way of putting it, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, and commendable courage, whot. We had thought you were not capable of independent action. You have, thus far, been rather dragged along in Miss Temminnick’s shadow.”

Dimity brightened. “My speaking out is a good thing? You aren’t going to report me to Lady Linette?”

“I didn’t say *that*, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

Dimity looked crestfallen. “Whatever you think is best, venerable one.”

The vampire only tilted his head at Dimity’s use of the recent lesson.

Sophronia put two and two together and looked at her friend. “You were *instructed* to ostracize me?”

Dimity nodded, clearly ashamed.

Sophronia narrowed her eyes at Professor Braithwope. *Are you testing all the other debuts in the same way, or were instructions different for each girl? Is the ostracism also a test for me?*

The vampire met her speculative gaze calmly. “Did you guess, Miss Temminnick?”

Sophronia knew better than to admit to anything. “I did think it interesting that they were all so eager to blame me for high marks and react in the same way. Even Dimity. And Sidheag, who doesn’t care for the machinations of girls.” A thought occurred to her. “Were my marks inflated in order to run this test?”

Professor Braithwope’s mustache fluffed in amusement. “You would think of that. No, they were not. But Professor Lefoux did emphasize your superiority in order to drive a wedge. Now, ladies, run along or you’ll be late for your next lesson.”

They exited into the hallway, and Dimity instantly linked arms with Sophronia. It felt good to have Dimity’s bubbling presence back at her side. They trotted down a hall crowded with fellow students. Agatha and Sidheag were waiting for them.

“Tell me,” instructed Sophronia, once they were all four gathered in one corner.

“It wasn’t our fault,” defended Dimity instantly.

Agatha nodded. She lowered her head, trying to hide her face under her bonnet. Sidheag was characteristically nonchalant. Sophronia could almost hear the taller girl's thoughts: *So we weren't talking to Sophronia and now we are? Ho hum*.

Dimity burbled, trying to explain. "You see, we were each taken aside individually, after our exams, and made to promise to ostracize whichever girl had the highest marks."

Agatha whispered, "We all thought it would be Monique."

Sidheag added, "She had taken the test before and had four more years' training."

"Exactly," jumped in Dimity. "That's what I thought, too. Lady Linette told each of us that this was the second half of our exam. That if we didn't do as instructed, our official records would be marked incomplete."

"She said they'd send me down if I didn't obey." Agatha looked tortured. "I tried to keep Dimity in line, too."

Dimity nodded. "Our continued presence at the school depended upon us not speaking to you."

"Now we'll probably all be dismissed," said Sidheag brightly.

"Better than being disloyal! Besides, you two didn't renege, I did." Dimity had all the conviction of one who has taken uncertain action and now must justify the consequences. She fiddled with the glittery ruby-and-gold broach at her throat—paste and gilt, of course.

Sophronia chewed her lip. "What if I admitted you were with me last year for the record room break-in? What if they knew how well you did then? Do you think that would count in your favor?"

Dimity was skeptical. "You would have to confess to something that we got away with. *And* pinned on Monique. They might count an admission against both of us."

"It's all so convoluted," said Sidheag, exasperated.

"It always is." Agatha was philosophically despondent.

"I hated to do it," admitted Dimity. "Well, right up until you scared off Dingleproops."

"It wasn't him, Dimity. Please believe me. I don't know who it was or why they set you up, but it wasn't him, I promise you that."

Dimity looked nonplussed. "He said as much, but I thought I'd been the butt of some cruel joke. Who was it, then?"

Preshea came bustling up. “If you ladies are quite finished? Sister Mattie wants to know why you aren’t in class.”

The girls glanced around. The hallway was empty except for them.

Preshea said to Dimity, “I see you broke your word to Lady Linette.”

Dimity huffed. “It was going too far. *We* were going too far.”

“Far is where they will throw you.” Preshea turned away.

“I’ll take *that* over being mean to a friend,” said Dimity staunchly to the girl’s retreating back. “Not that you would ever understand *that*, Preshea.”

Sophronia let out a small breath of relief. She hadn’t realized until that moment how unhappy she’d been without Dimity’s friendship. She thought she’d been rattling along fine on her own, but now she noticed the knots in her stomach releasing and the undeniable sensation of wanting to cry from relief.

Sophronia’s little band had reunited just in time. Monique’s promises of ball invitations were causing social mayhem. Snide comments and sharp elbows abounded. It was all much easier to endure now that the four of them were together again. They heard nothing from the teachers as to the repercussions of Dimity’s staunch decision, and they avoided speculating on that, at least. Everything else was fair game.

Sophronia brought them up to speed on some of her private investigations.

Sidheag put it together without frills, as her werewolf-trained mind was prone. “I’ve been wondering about this. Captain Niall said the vampires might be involved with Giffard’s flight? Why?”

Sophronia said, “If Professor Braithwope can tether to an airship, so could other roves.”

“Yes, but why now? Presumably old Prof has been doing it for simply ages.”

“Perhaps this new ship of Giffard’s is more vampire-safe. Or perhaps it has to do with the new technology Giffard is employing. If it works, it’d be much faster than other airships. Perhaps the vampires want access to that speed. I don’t think they like to be limited.”

Dimity looked at her friend. “I thought you were a progressive.”

“Maybe, but I don’t know if it’s right. I mean to say, Professor Braithwope is nice, but vampires need to be kept in check, don’t you think?”

Sidheag nodded vigorously. Dimity shrugged. Agatha looked at the floor.

Dimity said, “Mummy and Daddy have arguments like this. When Daddy says something like that, Mummy calls him a Pickleman.”

Sophronia nodded. “Well, I haven’t taken sides yet.”

Agatha said, “Oh, dear, are there sides?”

“Very likely. Speaking of your parents, Dimity, they haven’t upset anyone recently, have they? Anyone important or powerful? On either side, perhaps?”

Dimity frowned. “I don’t think so, why? Oh, because of that odd thing with Lord Dingleproops’s letter? You think someone might be trying to influence my parents through me?”

“It’s one explanation.”

“I don’t know.” Dimity brightened. “I shall write and ask them directly. Or better, I’ll get Pillover to do it. They will be delighted he’s finally taken an interest in something besides Latin verse. They might even tell him something truthful. I think they gave up on me when I announced my ‘hankies for hackneys’ good works plan.”

“What?” Sophronia was distracted.

“London cabbies are so very often under the weather,” said Dimity with a sniff. “One does what one can.”

“Oh, well, yes. And getting Pillover to write, good idea.” Sophronia was determined to be nice and not to take Dimity for granted ever again. Especially with the possibility that Dimity’s time at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s was soon to end. Even if Dimity had some harebrained scheme about hankies.

Sophronia remembered the previous evening, when she and Vieve had spied on Professors Lefoux and Shrimpdittle. “I think Monique is somehow in on it, too. I know she’s been crowing about this ball of hers, but she’s at least involved in Professor Lefoux’s experiment as an errand girl. We should run an infiltration on her.”

Dimity nodded. They’d taken instruction recently from Lady Linette in the planning of provocational action. Time to put that lesson to use.

“She’ll not believe it, if it were me,” said Dimity.

Sophronia agreed. “Nor Sidheag.” The taller girl looked up at her name. “You would never change your personality so drastically as to be interested in a ball. You might betray us, but not for an invitation.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Sidheag.

“It’ll have to be Agatha,” said Dimity.

Sophronia and Sidheag looked doubtful. Agatha was definitely their weakest link.

The redhead looked back and forth between them with dread in her eyes. “Oh, dear, scheming. I was afraid this would happen if we got chummy again.”

Sophronia hunkered down conspiratorially. “You’re the only possible choice, Agatha. You need to infiltrate Monique’s group.”

“Wait! What? Me?”

“Yes, simply pretend you really want an invitation to her blasted ball. Start lurking on the fringes. Keep an eye on her,” instructed Sophronia.

“Then report back to us with the details!” added Dimity triumphantly.

“Oh, I don’t know about this.” Agatha’s eyes were huge in distress.

“You don’t have to *do* anything, only watch.” Sidheag tried to be reassuring.

“It’ll be good for you, Agatha. Show the teachers you’ve got acumen.” Dimity was optimistic.

Agatha brightened. “Oh, do you think it might?” Unlike Sidheag and Dimity, Agatha actually wanted to stay at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s—to please her papa.

“And,” added Dimity brightly, “it might net you an invitation to the ball.”

That was not the right tactic. Agatha looked terrified at the possibility.

Sophronia said hurriedly, “Oh, I don’t think Monique would, no matter what you did. I shouldn’t worry about that, Agatha.”

“Oh, good.”

“So, are you game?” prodded Dimity, titillated at the prospect of gossip.

Agatha straightened and looked pugnacious. “I’ll do my best!”

Sophronia didn't expect much to come of it, but Agatha did try. She began, with remarkable subtlety, to lurk among Monique's followers. She inched her way down to that end of the table at meals. She offered to lend Monique her jewelry. Agatha had a great deal of nice jewelry, the real stuff, unlike Dimity.

Unfortunately, her reports were unsatisfactory. "The ball is all she talks of," she kept saying, and, "When can I stop?"

Then a few evenings later, when Dimity and Sophronia were getting ready for sleep, a demure knock sounded at their door. Dimity, in her nightgown, squeaked and dove for her bed. Sophronia, still dressed, went to answer.

It was Agatha. "Sorry to disturb you so late, but… Monique's gone."

"What?"

"I did like you suggested and went to her room just now, pretending I wanted that necklace back. Preshea tried to hide the fact, but Monique's not there. She's definitely snuck off. I think it has something to do with a message she got earlier. One of the mechanicals delivered it and she went all red."

"Oh, goodness. Thank you, Agatha!"

Agatha shuffled away. Sophronia closed the door and headed for her wardrobe.

"You're going after her?" asked Dimity.

"Here I was, proud all this time that I was out regularly, climbing the hull, visiting sooties, and spying on teachers, not even thinking Monique might be doing the same! She had permission to be out the other night, but I never thought she was a sneak like me…."

"Be fair, she can hardly be visiting sooties."

"Good point. Oh, none of this will work!" Sophronia slammed her wardrobe door. "I'm going to visit Sidheag. It's time to follow Vieve's example."

"What…?"

Before Dimity could finish her question, Sophronia was away.

She knocked on Agatha and Sidheag's door, hoping to be let in before Preshea noticed. When Sidheag opened it, Sophronia pushed past and closed the door quickly behind her.

"Sidheag, I need to borrow clothes."

Sidheag blinked. “Now? It’s one in the morning.”

“So?”

“Nothing I have could possibly fit you. You’re shorter and curvier.”

“Not dresses, silly. I need boys’ clothes. I thought you might have some.”

“What?”

Agatha looked up from the vanity, where she was brushing her hair. “You’re going after her, aren’t you?”

“Yes. And if she’s climbing, I have to climb faster. It’s time to get rid of skirts. Now, Sidheag? Please hurry.”

Sidheag grinned. “How sensible of you.” She dove for her wardrobe, which was in an unholy state. The act of opening the door caused a straw bonnet, a parasol, and a patchwork goose to fall out on her head. The taller girl barely noticed, batting away hats, gloves, and a single red stocking like so many gnats. She rifled through the contents, hurling items behind her in a deliciously enthusiastic way.

Agatha gave a whimper of distress. Her side of the room was neat as a new penny.

“Aha!” Sidheag resurfaced, triumphant, with a pair of tweed jodhpurs, of the type country squires used for hunting, and a wrinkled man’s shirt.

Agatha helped Sophronia out of her day gown and petticoats. Sophronia pulled on the trousers, buttoning the front and tucking her chemise in at the top. They were scandalously tight about the derriere. She put on the shirt, pushing up the sleeves. For the first time in her life, she was finding it easy to dress herself. *Vieve might have something in this garb*. But then, she supposed, that was because she was wearing a rather pedestrian outfit. *True gentlemen need a valet to help with the cravat*.

Sidheag gave her a funny look. “You’re leaving on your stays?”

“Of course! I haven’t lost *all* sense of propriety!”

Sidheag snorted. “Corsets constrict movement. I always take mine off when I wear that outfit.”

Sophronia gasped. “Bare?”

“We’ve been over this before—raised by werewolves, remember? What do you think they do before they change shape?”

Agatha gasped, then whispered softly, “You’ve seen men with no clothing?”

Sophronia tried to stop herself from blushing, remembering her illicit observation of swimming sooties.

Sidheag did not look ashamed. “Of course, silly.”

Agatha took a deep breath and then blurted, “What’s it like… when they… you know…?”

“They shape-shift? Gruesome. All the bones break and then re-form into wolf shape. Most of them howl in pain. There’s a reason it’s called a curse.”

Sidheag was going to make Agatha say it out loud. The redhead whispered, “No, what’s a man like down there?”

“Oh.” Sidheag wrinkled her nose. “Unimpressive. They have”—she gestured toward her own nether regions with one hand—“a sort of dangly sausage—lacks tailoring.”

Sophronia blinked in surprise. That sounded worse than Sidheag’s description of a werewolf shift. She hadn’t seen any of the sooties that close up. “Really?”

“Yes, like it wasn’t fitted into its casing properly. And hairy.” Sidheag was enjoying shocking them.

Agatha thought Sidheag was pulling her leg. “I don’t believe you.”

Sophronia interrupted this fascinating subject. “Ladies, thank you very much for your help. But I really must be off.” She managed a creditable bow, scuttling away before Sidheag could say anything more licentious.

Wielding a Ballistic Exploding Steam Missile Fire Prong

It was much easier to climb about the airship in masculine garb; Sophronia regretted not trying it sooner. True, petticoats had saved her life once, but this! This was liberty. She resolved, once they reached London, to acquire gentlemen's dress, upper- and lower-class. Plus a fake mustache. *Where does one purchase a mustache in London? Fleet Street?* Not that she would ever wear such things in public, but for midnight jaunts to visit sooties, why be modest?

She skirted the outside of the residential areas, then the classrooms, and soon she was outside the tassel section. It was a bit challenging to climb surrounded by a cloud of dense white damp. Twice her foot slipped, and she thought fondly of gentlemen's riding boots and then wondered if that might be taking things too far. Footwear, after all, was a serious commitment.

She moved as quickly as she could; with all the white she wouldn't know she'd found Monique until she was right on top of her. Then, as Sophronia was jumping from one balcony to another, she caught a flicker of skirts above her doing the same.

The blonde was heading toward the upper front starboard section of teacher residences. Sophronia knew the area well, even which balconies belonged to which teachers. She usually avoided them assiduously.

She took out her grappling rope and swung it up onto a balcony above. It caught and hooked. She shimmied up—*so much easier in trousers!*—and

retracted the hurlie, taking a moment to run her hand along the railing. There were little scrapes and nicks—some fresh, some ancient—indicating that other grappling hooks had been used. *Why should I be surprised? This is a school of espionage, after all.* She swung, hurlied, and climbed up another level so that she was above Monique and could follow her from there.

Monique was not the most graceful climber. She was wearing an evening dress and was hindered by the length and fullness of her skirts. Even at her most prudish, Sophronia wore her shortest dress with only one or two petticoats when climbing. Nevertheless, Monique moved as if she did it regularly and was following a pattern. She did not look around to see if she was being pursued. Eventually, she stopped at a balcony, climbed over the railing, and knocked on the door. All the other quarters nearby had attractive French doors with stained glass. Professor Lefoux's glass was all gears in grays and blues, Lady Linette's was roses in reds and pinks, and Sister Mattie's was vines and flowers in greens and yellows.

This door had no glass, and the porthole window to the room was blacked over—Professor Braithwope's rooms. Vampires did not like sunlight, and floating high above cloud cover, the sun beat down on Mademoiselle Geraldine's more than anywhere else in England.

The door swung open and Monique entered the vampire's nest.

Sophronia made her way over. It was a risk, but the only way to listen was via the cracks in *that* door. She'd have to be particularly quiet, given Professor Braithwope's supernatural hearing. Hopefully, Monique would be talking loudly about herself, as usual.

Sophronia hooked her grapple over the railing, then unstrapped and lowered the wristband end of the hurlie, careful to let the excess come to rest without slapping. Then she swung herself over and by slow degrees climbed down.

Her weekly visits to the sooties and other extracurricular excursions had given her arm muscles no young lady of quality ought to have. She'd had to let out the seams on most of her sleeves. Thus far, no one had noticed. She was certain to get a lecture on her diet if Sister Mattie did. Mademoiselle Geraldine's young ladies were not supposed to become portly.

Sophronia attained the balcony and padded to the door. Taking out her ear trumpet, she pressed it against the crack between the hinges.

"… there must be *something* you can do!" Monique's tone was wheedling.

"I'm afraid not. She is not my queen, even were I hive bound, whot. The words of a rove hold little weight. It's too bad you gave Lady Linette a reason to send you down. You pushed her too far with that prototype business, and then poor testing marks. They have a legitimate excuse that can be justified to the trustees, and your parents."

"But I've given you years of my blood!"

Monique is Professor Braithwope's drone, Sophronia realized. Somehow she wasn't surprised. He would be a perfect advocate. It was a little creepy that he fed on a student. But then again, the very idea of him sticking those fangs into anyone's neck was creepy.

"Nothing I can do about it, whot. You should have stayed in everyone's good graces until this Giffard nonsense passed, as I instructed. I will have a better standing with all hives after. Now, you must leave the ship as soon as you come out. Our contract together ends the moment we land in London."

I wonder if Professor Braithwope is the reason we're called to town, Sophronia thought. It would make perfect sense. *He is the only teacher who can't travel there on his own. The whole school has to go with him. He is, after all, tethered to the airship.*

Professor Braithwope's tone became almost kindly. "You are more connected to her than I at this point, whot. After all, I did not authorize the redistribution of the prototype; you undertook that at her request."

"You thwarted me and them in that matter," said Monique. "They aren't happy with either of us."

Sophronia rubbed at her forehead, trying to make her brain's inner cogs tumble smoothly. Last autumn, when Monique tried to steal the prototype, Sophronia had thought she was working for the government. This conversation indicated that Monique was working for a vampire hive instead. If they wanted the prototype valve then, did they still want it now? *Goodness, I wish Vieve would tell me what that newer one from the oddgob was for. Is it still all about communication across distances? Or do the mini ones do something more sinister?*

"Hence the reason I do this test with Giffard," said Professor Braithwope.

Well, that cinches it. Professor Braithwope needs to meet with Giffard

and his new dirigible; that's why the school is going to London.

The vampire continued. "What will you do to get back in their good graces?"

Monique said nothing. Sophronia wished she could see their faces. Eavesdropping was difficult without a window.

Finally Monique muttered, "I don't know."

I'd wager she already has a plan, thought Sophronia.

"I wager you already have a plan," said Professor Braithwope.

"And you're hungry enough to let me get away with not telling you about it."

Sophronia realized, for the first time, that Monique had always favored high-necked gowns. She also liked silk shawls and ribbon chokers. *How could I not have realized it was to disguise feeding bites? I'm going to have to pay better attention to that aspect of fashion in the future*.

"Oh, no, my dear, you forget, I no longer care," said the vampire, sharper than Sophronia had ever heard him speak to a student. "Now, come here."

Sophronia prepared to shimmy back up the rope.

After a long silence, Monique spoke, her voice weaker than before. "Since you are no longer looking after me, Professor, you must consider this our last meal together."

Professor Braithwope said, "Of course, wouldn't want to impose."

"You have… *alternative* options?" Monique sounded jealous.

Sophronia began to make a mental list, trying to think of all forty-five students and which ones might be hiding the mark of Professor Braithwope's favor.

The vampire did not answer Monique.

Sophronia considered offering herself. There would be quite an advantage to having a vampire's help. But it smacked of cheating. Also, the idea made her squeamish. It was a mark of how far she had come during her time at Mademoiselle Geraldine's that it didn't make her *more* than squeamish.

"Well, Professor, will you be able to attend my ball?"

"I'm afraid not. That's well within Lord Akeldama's territory. I'll stay with the ship around Hyde Park, neutral ground, whot."

"Shame," said Monique.

“I am certain you will catch London afire with your charm,” said the vampire gallantly. Professor Braithwope never forgot his manners, which was why he taught lessons on them.

“I’d rather do it with my looks,” snapped Monique.

Angry footsteps headed in Sophronia’s direction. She scrabbled backward, sacrificing silence for speed. She grabbed her rope at the edge of the balcony and shimmied up, coiling it behind her.

The door below burst open, and both Professor Braithwope and Monique walked out.

“I heard something!” said the professor.

“No one is here.” Monique glanced around but did not look up.

But Professor Braithwope did, just as Sophronia tumbled over the railing of the balcony above. Their eyes met for one startled instant.

The vampire winked at her. Actually winked, his mustache bristling conspiratorially. “Ah, perhaps you are right. Simply the wind, whot?”

There was no wind.

Monique had her own concerns and let the matter drop. It was one of the things that made her such a poor intelligencer. She was good at putting lessons to use, but only in the service of her own ends.

“I can’t believe it,” said Dimity over breakfast. Her objection was almost loud enough for Monique to hear at the other end of the table.

Monique, fortunately, was in deep counsel with Preshea, Lord Dingleproops, Lord Mersey, and several of the older girls on the subject of decorations. Who supplied the best fresh flowers in London? And did they want ribbons, rosettes, and streamers, or only two fluttering options?

“He’s her advocate on staff. Or he *was*. I suppose it makes sense, but I never should have believed it of *him*. I was certain Prof B. had better taste. And”—Dimity’s attention was caught by the end of the table—“why must Preshea flirt with him so outrageously?”

Sophronia was accustomed to her friend’s lightning-fast change of topics. “Lord Dingleproops?”

“Of course, Lord Dingleproops! I could hardly mean Lord Mersey. He’s obviously yours. And Pillover doesn’t count. Pillover never counts. They

are the only three assigned to our table."

"Not that Monique would ever flirt with me," added Pillover, staring glumly into his bowl of porridge. Sister Mattie had put him on a diet. He was, if possible, even more morbid as a result.

"Lord Mersey is *not* mine," Sophronia protested rather too vehemently.

Dimity got coy. "Does he know that?"

"Now, now, we were talking about Lord Dingleproops. I thought you had moved on. The lack of chin. The nasty joke missive."

"Well, I genuinely think he didn't know about that. I compared handwriting. It wasn't his on that letter requesting the assignation."

Sophronia nodded. "Still, I thought you were no longer tempted to partake."

"I wasn't, until Preshea came along and stole him away from me."

"Dimity!"

"Well, it's true. I'm a terribly, terribly shallow person."

Pillover nodded into his gruel.

Dimity turned on him. "Speaking of which, have you heard back from the Parental Evils yet?"

Pillover shook his head even more glumly, practically sinking face-first into the porridge, he was hunched so low.

Dimity went back to commenting on the other end of the table. "Oh, would you look at Preshea, flashing that diamond necklace around? One shouldn't wear diamonds to breakfast, so gauche. As if she came from real wealth!"

"Doesn't she *have* money?" Pillover looked up. "She acts like she has money."

"Which is the most certain indication that she does not. People with money never act like it. Take Agatha, for example."

"Which one is Agatha?" wondered Pillover, in a tone of voice that said all girls looked the same.

"The redhead."

Pillover glanced at Agatha, who was dutifully pretending to be part of Monique's inner circle. Her bonnet had slid back, her hair was coming undone, and she'd forgotten her lace tuck—again.

Pillover looked understandably doubtful as to the girl's substance.

Preshea's tinkling laugh rippled down the table. The pretty brunette

pressed a hand to Lord Dingleproops's arm and looked up at him adoringly. Her diamonds sparkled almost as much as the avarice in her eyes.

Lord Dingleproops seemed stunned. His cravat was tied so nicely, one could almost, reflected Sophronia, forgive him the lack of chin.

Dimity said, "I wrote him poetry!"

Preshea let go of the young lord and continued with her conversation. Dingleproops brushed at the spot where her hand had been, straightening his jacket.

"Dimity," Sophronia said, horrified by such an admission, "you didn't *give* him the poetry, did you?"

"Certainly not."

Sidheag tilted back in her chair, grinning. "Well, let's hear it."

"Oh, no. I don't think that's a good idea at all," Sophronia said.

But Dimity was already dipping into her reticule and pulling out a scrap of paper. She gave it to Sidheag, who read it with a perfectly straight face, her tawny eyes dancing, and then passed it to Sophronia.

> *My love is like a red red rose*
> *occasionally he has a red red nose*
> *he could keep me warm in the snows*
> *I wager he has very nice toes*.

Sophronia could think of nothing to say except "Oh, Dimity."

Things might have continued in this vein except a violent jerk shook the entire airship, accompanied by a rumbling clunk and then a sinking sensation.

The girls looked at one another.

Dimity glared suspiciously at Sophronia. "What did you do now?"

Sophronia widened her eyes. "Not me this time, I promise."

"It's *always* you," accused Sidheag in an appreciative kind of way.

"Are we sinking? I do believe we are sinking," said Lord Dingleproops a tad loudly.

"Falling, my dear Dingleproops," corrected Lord Mersey. "We are not at sea."

"Landing, perhaps?" suggested Dingleproops, obviously uncomfortable

with the concept of falling out of the sky.

The girls were also discombobulated, but they were not so gauche as to talk about it. They looked to the head table to see how the teachers were behaving. Aside from Professor Shrimpdittle, none of them were reacting. Even Mademoiselle Geraldine was calmly consuming crumpets. Professor Braithwope, it being daylight, was still abed.

Sensing the shift in student mood, Lady Linette rose to address the masses.

“We are lowering for a refuel and groundside layover. Students will engage in various land-bound activities, including an al fresco luncheon during which time you will be expected to undertake consumption, courting, and conspiracy over calico cloth. After sunset, there will be a lesson with Captain Niall for the ladies, and badminton in the dark for the gentlemen. Be certain to gather all your necessities after breakfast; you will not be permitted back aboard until supper.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine added, “Ladies, be certain to wear your wide-brimmed hats. You know how I feel about freckles.”

This announcement was met with enthusiasm. Outside classes? All day and evening? How thrilling. Plus, picnics were widely considered a wheeze.

Everyone attempted to finish breakfast posthaste, the better to have extra time to change into walking dresses and outside bonnets.

Shortly thereafter, they found themselves trotting down the steam-powered drop-staircase onto a grassy hilltop pasture near a diminutive forest. Sophronia spared a moment to wonder what locals might think of a random low-floating cloud. However, it was romantic to imagine being seen descending out of it.

“As if we were cloud princesses,” suggested Dimity. She’d chosen to branch out from her customary vibrant dresses for one of ruffled cream-and-dove-gray chiffon, looking very cloudlike herself.

As soon as all the students and most of the teachers were disgorged—Professor Braithwope and Mademoiselle Geraldine remaining on board—the airship cloud rose majestically back into the air and drifted out of sight behind the trees.

It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky—which made a random airship cloud all the more peculiar. The girls looked a picture. It was still cold for spring, but out had come pretty flowered muslins and striped

seersucker walking dresses. There were parasols galore, and embroidered fringed shawls, not to mention shepherdess hats and Italian straw bonnets. Admittedly, the stylish dresses had been modified by belts with dangling gadgets, wrist attachments, suspiciously heavy chatelaines, and, in Sophronia's case, a large reticule that looked like a metal sausage dog.

Lessons, it must be confessed, were not a resounding success. The students were distracted easily. Sophronia and the debuts joined with some of the middle-level girls and all of the visiting boys for a lesson with Lady Linette in how to stroll in Hyde Park. Much time was spent going over the different ways to cut an unwelcome suitor, how tightly a man's arm might be grasped, and the best way to engage in espionage under direct sunlight. They also discussed the distribution, use, and application of stealth spy rocks.

There was a picnic of broiled beef, roast duck, braised pork pie, cold poached chicken in cream sauce, pickles and relishes, crusty French bread, and stewed fruit, accompanied by punch, which was followed by tea with pear turnovers, cabinet pudding, and apricot macaroons. They learned how to sit on wet ground and still eat with delicacy. Conversation centered mainly on the various evil projects under the purview of their gentlemen visitors, with the young ladies inventing new uses and applications. It turned into a kind of game. Lord Dingleproops, for example, was working on mustache-curling and-waxing technologies, and the girls wondered if his wax might be used to convey secret messages, or even if the curl of a man's mustache might function in such a manner. The discussion evolved to the interesting question of whether a gentleman could tattoo a secret message upon his chin, then grow out his beard, thus transporting said message into enemy territory with no one the wiser. Would a man want a message permanently upon his chin? That was the quandary. And could one legitimately ascribe nefarious intent to any man with a full beard as a result?

"I've always thought beards suspicious," said Dimity with conviction.

Sophronia felt that Lord Dingleproops might be improved by a beard. After all, no one would know his chin appeared to have eloped with, quite probably, Monique's brain and Preshea's sense of humor.

After the picnic, the ladies and gentlemen were permitted to socialize further. Flirting was cautiously encouraged, with Lord Dingleproops and

Lord Mersey being instantly subsumed by Preshea and Monique, respectively. Sophronia and Dimity linked arms and tootled around. Agatha trailed dutifully behind her mark, as ordered, along with a small gaggle of fellow sycophants. Sidheag mooched off with a stick to beat a tree or something. The teachers settled into a group near the hilltop to keep an eye on the mingling young people.

Sophronia and Dimity wandered into the small forest, where they found an empty patch of ground and put Bumbersnoot down to have a snuffle in the fallen leaves. He was given strict instructions not to catch anything on fire, although it was damp enough that he would have had to put considerable effort into the attempt.

He squeaked about, his stubby mechanical legs getting caught on twigs, his ears flapping with toots of smoke, and his tail wagging back and forth eagerly. Sophronia did not bother to remove the lace bits wrapped about him, so that he trailed ribbons and straps in his wake like an entirely disreputable bride.

They talked of nothing consequential and watched the mechanimal's antics. Bumbersnoot was wrestling with a large stick, and Sophronia couldn't tell whether he wanted to swallow it into his storage compartment or his boiler. Suddenly, the little creature sat back and whistled, pressing out steam forcefully in some kind of an alarm, like a teakettle.

Both girls were startled. They'd had no idea he could make any noise whatsoever, aside from the clang when he stumbled into furniture.

Moments later three slablike men materialized out of the trees. One of them grabbed Dimity, and another Sophronia. The third stood with arms akimbo, as if he intended to make a speech.

Sophronia found herself most indelicately confined. There was one beefy arm about her waist, trapping her arms against her side, and another over her mouth, preventing her from shouting for assistance.

"Where's the boy?" demanded the third ruffian, looking around. "We need him as well."

Sophronia tried to kick her captor, lashing out with one booted foot, but heavy skirts and copious petticoats prevented her from doing any damage.

Dimity was also struggling. Sophronia could see her friend's wide hazel eyes above the other ruffian's arm.

Bumbersnoot, ignored by their attackers, took temporary refuge behind a

stump.

Sophronia really didn't want to, but she did the only thing she could. She opened her mouth and bit down hard on the man's sweaty arm.

The man howled in pain but didn't let her go, only jerked her head back and tightened his grip over her mouth in a most uncomfortable manner.

"The boy should be with them; they are siblings, after all."

Pillover. They want Pillover, too.

Bumbersnoot, not at all pleased with this treatment of his mistress, circled about and approached Sophronia's captor.

Sophronia couldn't give him any orders. Even if she were able to speak, he rarely obeyed verbal commands. She had no idea what he might do. She was terribly afraid he would get himself permanently damaged; one swift kick from the ruffian's anvil-sized boot and he was done for.

Her mind cataloged lessons. They'd had nothing on freeing themselves from larger, stronger captors. Her elbows were tight to her waist, but she made an attempt to reach for her chatelaine—the Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification hung there. It was a weapon, of sorts. She couldn't get hold of it, but she could reach her other wrist.

She still wore the hurlie. She rarely took it off except to bathe. She managed to use one hand to release the catch.

Bumbersnoot moved closer.

Sophronia couldn't point the grapple at her own captor, and she daren't risk hitting Dimity, but the man who had spoken was an easy target. She angled her wrist at him and fired. She got the grapple over the ruffian's shoulder, jerking back to bring the hook into the flesh of his upper back. The man screamed and turned, scrabbling with his hands.

"Get it off, get it out!" he yelled. There was blood leaking down his shirt—he was without a jacket. All three of them were. *So thuggish*.

In the same instant, Bumbersnoot snuck up against Sophronia's captor's leg and blasted hot steam on the man's bare ankle, scalding him badly. *That'll teach him not to wear hose*, thought Sophronia.

The man yelled in surprise and let her go. Sophronia dove down, scooped up Bumbersnoot, and rolled out of reach. Lady Linette had made them practice that maneuver in full skirts. The extra material actually helped, cushioning the somersault. Sophronia couldn't get very far, however, as her wrist was still attached to the other man via the hurlie.

At the sight of the blood, Dimity fainted, becoming a dead weight in her ruffian's arms. He swore and tried to keep hold, but Dimity's chiffon dress was slippery, and she hadn't Sophronia's propensity for covering herself with gadgets. Without handholds, the man lost his grip. Dimity collapsed to the forest floor.

The bleeding man managed to free himself from Sophronia's hurlie, which she retracted. Momentarily unencumbered, Sophronia pulled out her letter opener. She'd begun to carry it right after they started knife-fighting lessons, as soon as she realized it would work just as well and be more innocuous. After all, a lady might expect a missive at any moment. It wouldn't do to be without a letter opener. She made a mental note to start wearing and training with her hurlie in her left hand so she could use both as weapons in a fight.

With one ruffian trying to pick up a limp Dimity, another clutching his burned leg, and the third trying to grab his own bleeding back, it looked like Sophronia had the best of them. She was no fool, however. It was her and Bumbersnoot, whose ribbon strap she threw over her neck, against three fully grown men. She ought to run, but she wasn't about to leave Dimity in their clutches!

The men were wary of coming at her again. She was, after all, armed with a projectile. She wished for a gun. If this kind of thing were to become a regular occurrence, munitions lessons really shouldn't be left for older students. Then her training kicked in: *get them talking*.

"What do you want?" she asked, pleased with how steady her voice sounded.

"Oh, no, little miss, we know better than that," said one.

Another said to his companions, "We can't let her go. She'll alert the others."

"Good idea," said Sophronia, at which juncture she threw her head back and screamed at the top of her lungs.

Instantly, not so very far away, she heard someone crashing through the trees. She screamed again.

Apparently, deciding it was most important to hush her, two ruffians charged. Sophronia took aim and fired with her hurlie a second time. It hit the burned man in the chest and bounced harmlessly off. The hooks were made to catch on the draw back, not the firing. *I should get Vieve to mount a*

sharp point in the middle that pops out when I release the turtle. Still the man howled in surprise; the spring-loaded release was strong, so it would at least bruise. Then the other man was upon her.

Sophronia fell into Captain Niall's best defensive stance for the smaller personage when faced with a large opponent, and raised her letter opener. The ruffian moved in, no doubt relying on the fact that she was female and could not possibly know anything about fighting. Captain Niall had only taught them a single attack, but he had made them practice it over and over and over. Sophronia slashed out, opening up a long gash on the man's arm.

He backed away warily.

The other ruffian stopped, grabbed at her grappling hook, and began tugging on it. Soon he would have Sophronia by a leash, and she had no time to undo the turtle from her wrist, focused as she was on fighting the first man. Sophronia prepared to kick. That was a dirty tactic, not taught by Captain Niall, but Soap had shown her a few tricks and she was prepared to use them if necessary.

It was not necessary, for a rescuer appeared out of the forest.

"You screamed, madam?"

"Why, Lord Mersey, what are you doing here?"

"Following you, of course. Spot of bother?"

"Little bit of one, yes."

The young man looked with interest at Sophronia's opponents, one holding a collapsed Dimity, one bleeding from a gash to the arm, and the third bleeding from a wound to the back.

"My dear Ria, you hardly need my help."

"Hardly."

"Have I told you recently how much I admire a capable woman?" As he spoke, the young lord reached inside his coat and produced the most remarkable gadget. It wasn't very big and was rather flat, which explained how he could keep it in his coat without upsetting the lines, but it was extremely evil looking. It was long and sharp, with multiple attachments and a nozzle blackened from extruding some toxic substance. It looked highly flammable and quite deadly. Vieve would have been enthralled.

The ruffians were suitably impressed. They stopped.

"Put down the young lady," said Felix.

The man holding Dimity hesitated.

Felix was an aristocrat and accustomed to instant obedience. “This moment!” He swung the weapon to aim at the man and Dimity. “I assure you, I am a very good shot. I will most certainly hit you, not her.”

“What is that thing?” quavered the ruffian.

“Oh, this?” Felix was casual. “*This* is a ballistic exploding steam missile fire prong. It’s my latest invention, and it’s very, very good at being deadly.”

That did it. The ruffian holding Dimity dropped her once more, and she flopped becomingly, like a sleeping princess from a fairy story.

The man who had been hurlied said to the other two, “We ain’t paid enough for this.”

The others apparently agreed. “Leave it.”

With little more to-do, the three ruffians dashed away into the forest.

Sophronia and Felix looked at each other.

“Nice prong,” said Sophronia after a moment.

Felix grinned and waggled his eyebrows lasciviously. “Thank you for saying so.”

Sophronia was instantly suspicious. “You mean that isn’t a ballistic exploding steam missile fire prong?”

“No such thing, my dear Ria, but it certainly sounds wicked, doesn’t it?”

“Then what is it?”

He handed the evil-looking object over. “Ah, a portable boot-blackening apparatus with pressure-controlled particulate emissions, and attached accoutrement to achieve the highest possible shine. For the stylish gentleman on the go.” He presented his own well-turned-out leg, proving that his boots were as shiny as could be, despite exposure to the outside environment.

Sophronia looked down the barrel of the thing and, accidentally, pulled the trigger. A fine mist of boot black hit her in the face, making her squeak, sputter, and drop the object.

She pulled out her handkerchief to repair the damage but left the apparatus where it lay in the leaves. “Automated shoe-shining kit?”

“Shoe-shining *prong*.” Felix picked it up and moved closer to her. “You are unhurt?”

Sophronia nodded, still trying to clean her face.

After a moment, Felix took the handkerchief away from her and began

to tenderly remove all trace of the black. Sophronia submitted to his ministrations in a momentary lapse of training. Her mind went blank, and she couldn't determine how to extricate herself from the intimacy. She was not prepared for tenderness.

A small cough and rustle of leaves interrupted the tête-à-tête.

Dimity was awake.

Sophronia grabbed her blackened handkerchief from Felix and ran to kneel next to her friend.

"What happened?" wondered Dimity.

"You fainted."

"Yes, I know that."

"And then Felix… uh… Lord Mersey came to our rescue with a shoe-shining kit."

"Sophronia, have I told you recently that your explanations often lack a certain *panache*?"

"Well, you will keep fainting during the best bits."

Felix ambled over. "How are you feeling, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott?"

"Oh, perfectly topping, Lord Mersey. I'm always topping. And you?"

"Tolerably well. Shall we rejoin the rest of the party?"

"Jolly good idea," said Dimity, accepting his hand up and his offer of an arm.

He offered his other arm to Sophronia. "Ria?"

Sophronia took it, not wishing to be churlish.

"Now, ladies, do we say anything of this to anyone?" he asked, not being trained by Mademoiselle Geraldine's into the custom of never saying anything unless instructed otherwise.

"Of what, exactly?" wondered Sophronia.

"I fainted. I've no idea what you are on about," added Dimity.

"Ah," said Lord Mersey, "quite. I see," just as if he did quite see.

Dimity and Sophronia looked at each other. Dimity nodded. Now they both knew for certain that someone was after Dimity and Pillover. *I hope their parents can shed some light on this situation*, thought Sophronia. *Or Dimity and I are going to have to take some seriously restrictive precautions*. She was already planning ways to booby-trap their room of an evening.

The Sootie Challenge

Soap, where did you go after you let us off for the picnic?" Feeling she ought to take every advantage of the general befuddlement of a day spent groundside, Sophronia had decided to visit the boiler room that very night.

Soap paused in an attempt to sound out a word in his reading primer. "We went to take on more water, fuel, and a certain *delivery*."

"Delivery of what?"

"Ah, miss, that I don't know. But it must be important because we went *well* out of our way."

Sophronia nibbled her lower lip. "Did Vieve notice anything?"

"Did Vieve notice any what?" asked Vieve, wandering up.

"This delivery the school took on. Soap says… wait a moment!"

"No, Soap didn't say that," said Soap.

Sophronia had noticed something unusual, or rather someone unusual, trailing Vieve. There was the expected crowd of nosy off-duty sooties, but there was also…

"Dimity! What are you doing in the boiler room?"

"Good evening, Sophronia. My, it's rather dingy down here, isn't it?" Dimity came forward out of the pack of sooties, looking embarrassed. The sooties were accustomed to Sophronia and Sidheag in their parochial garb, but Dimity wore a visiting gown and a bonnet with silk flowers. They had never seen the like in the boiler room.

"I had to bring her," said Vieve. "I dropped in to check on Bumbersnoot, but you had left. She insisted."

“*How* did she insist?” Sophronia found it difficult to persuade Vieve to do anything Vieve didn’t want to.

Vieve blushed. “She simply *did*.”

Dimity was self-satisfied. “I blackmailed her with a hat!”

Sophronia cocked her head. “Dimity, why are you down here?”

Dimity proclaimed, “I brought pamphlets!” and produced a small stack of parchment, homemade and cut to resemble those of the temperance movement.

“What?” Sophronia took one.

“To help the poor dears improve themselves, of course. There’s a whole section on cleanliness. See, here?” Dimity pointed to a drawing of a bar of soap. She began handing out the pamphlets to the sooties, none of whom were particularly impressed. A few checked to see if they might be rolled for smoking tobacco, and one used a corner to pick his teeth. Soap took his with alacrity and began to try sounding out the words.

Sophronia said, “Oh, Dimity, they can’t read, remember?”

Dimity was crestfallen. “I forgot that bit.”

“I’m learning, miss,” piped up Soap, waving both primer and pamphlet.

“Very good, Mr. Soap, most improving,” said Dimity, clearly under the impression that it was her charitable efforts that had encouraged his interest in education.

“You must excuse Dimity,” said Sophronia to the sooties at large. “She believes that to be a lady she must practice acts of charitable benevolence. She has selected you lot as her victims.” The sooties laughed. Dimity was not very prepossessing. She looked as though she couldn’t victimize a beetle.

Dimity ignored this slur on her character. “I do hope you don’t find my efforts condescending.”

“Not at all, miss,” said Soap. “This is my very first personal bit of paper. I’ve never owned a pamphlet afore. Thank you.” He wasn’t joking. Sophronia looked at her tall friend with new eyes. He always seemed to be so happy; did he actually suffer from deprivation?

One of the others asked, “Will your charitable actions come with more of them little cakes?”

“Oh,” said someone else. “Is she *that* Dimity?”

Dimity had encouraged Sophronia to filch nibbles from tea and pass

them out to the sooties. Sophronia attributed the largesse to her friend. Thus, while none of the sooties had actually met Dimity, they all knew of her. They had been thinking of her as a kind of angel of pudding mercy.

Dimity brightened as the sooties turned more affectionate eyes upon her. “I shall do my best. I’m certain stealing for charity is a worthy application of my intelligencer skills.”

“You and Robin Hood,” said Sophronia.

“Oh.” Dimity was confused. “Was he a spy, too?”

Soap had only really spent one evening in Dimity’s company, and that was during an infiltration. He turned to Sophronia at this juncture and said, “Is she always like this?”

“Pretty much,” answered Sophronia.

Soap returned to the pamphlet. “Prop-per, high-gine-y,” he read out. “What’s high-gine-y? Some kind of animal?”

“Nope.” Sophronia giggled. “It simply means clean.”

“I’m so stupid,” muttered Soap.

“You’re brilliant!” Sophronia defended him staunchly. “You simply haven’t learned yet. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh at you.”

“S’all right, miss. You really think I’m brilliant?” he fished hopefully.

“Of course,” said Sophronia without hesitation. “Book learning will only take you so far.”

One of Soap’s quick white smiles flashed.

Dimity finished passing out pamphlets and turned expectantly. “Right. What do we do now?”

“Usually, practice dirty fighting. This young man will help.” Sophronia beckoned Furnival over.

Furnival Jones was a kindhearted, scruffy boy and one of Sidheag’s favorite fighting partners. He had a perpetual expression of mild surprise on his face due to a near absence of eyebrows, the result of a close encounter with a boiler.

“Miss?”

“Be a dear, Furnival, and go at Miss Dimity here for a bit?”

Furnival looked Dimity up and down doubtfully.

“Oh, must I?” Dimity hated to fight.

“Certainly.”

“Oh, very well.” Dimity kilted up her lovely skirts and gamely grabbed

a stoking pole, aiming it limply at poor Furnival.

The sootie backed away and looked helplessly at Soap.

Soap gave him the nod.

Sophronia said, “I know she doesn’t look like it, but she’s trained like Sidheag and me.”

The boy swung his own pole tentatively at Dimity.

Dimity blocked.

Sophronia, Vieve, and Soap watched for a bit. Dimity wasn’t very good, but Furnival treated her gently. Unless Sophronia missed her guess, the poor lad was already developing romantic feelings toward her friend. Many of the sooties probably were. Dimity was so pretty and chattery, she quite overpowered the average male. Many gentlemen were unable to cope with abundant chatter, which is why they so often married it.

Soap went to encourage the fighters. Dimity developed a bit of backbone under his tutelage and struck with more firmness. Furnival scrambled to block.

Sophronia turned to Vieve. “Anything new on that mini-prototype?”

Vieve’s small face went serious under her oversized newsboy cap. She dipped into her waistcoat pocket and produced the faceted crystalline object. “It’s giving me stick. Why put a communication device inside an oddgob?”

Sophronia took it from her, rolling it about in her hands. “Definitely for communication?”

“Yes, and I have a few theories as to application.”

“Of course you do. Anything you wish to share?”

“Sophronia, my dear,” said the ten-year-old, sounding not unlike one of the professors, “I must *test* the theories first.”

“Of course. Silly of me to even ask.”

“What are you two plotting?” asked Soap, leaving Dimity and Furnival to whack irresolutely at each other.

“Nothing,” said Sophronia and Vieve in unison.

Soap was not convinced and took the mini-prototype from Sophronia, his soot-covered fingers brushing the back of her hand most unnecessarily as he did so. He held the valve gingerly, as though afraid to smudge it. “What’s it for?”

“That,” said Sophronia, “is the question.”

A set of birdlike whistling noises floated into the air, the sootie version of a proximity alarm. The boys who were assembled to watch Dimity's duel shuffled about uncomfortably and looked over at Soap for direction. It was not unlike a group of pigeons disturbed by the presence of a partridge in their midst.

"Oh, ho, what's going on here?" said a cultured male voice.

Felix Mersey slouched up, as if he always wandered the boiler rooms of floating girls' seminaries. He was dusty with coal, having obviously climbed in from the outer hull through the hatch.

Sophronia's first thought was: *Oh, dear, he's figured out how to get around the ship*. Her second was: *Thank goodness I wore a dress this evening*. Her third was: *Life probably would have stayed easier had Felix and Soap never met*.

At an almost imperceptible hand signal from the taller boy, the young lord found himself surrounded by sooties, none of whom looked pleased to see him. Vieve melted into the shadows. Dimity came to stand with Sophronia.

Soap straightened, put down his primer, and walked over to the viscount. Felix Mersey might be the cream of the aristocracy, but in the boiler room Soap was undisputed king—grimy empire though it might be.

Felix was not impressed. "Who are you, darkie? And what are you doing with a guidance valve?"

Sophronia didn't like anyone disrespecting Soap. But even while battling anger, she filed Felix's comment away: the mini-prototype was called a *guidance valve*. She jerked forward to take back the guidance valve and show her allegiance to Soap.

Dimity held her back. Her friend was remarkably strong for such an innocent-looking creature. "My dear, we'd best let them deal with this in their own way."

"But—"

"This is not a matter for ladies." Dimity considered. "Or even intelligencers."

"Oh, but I—" protested Sophronia.

"No, dear, no."

Soap smiled his big, wide, welcoming grin at Felix. For once, it did not look friendly. "Ah, now, little lordling, you're in our world. I'm thinking a

bit of politeness might be in order."

"To commoners? I think not."

"We can boost you right back out that hatch you came in."

"Hardly sporting. There's plenty more of you scrappers than there is me."

"Ah, yes, but if you're going about not treating us as gentlemen, we don't have to behave like 'em, do we?"

"As if you knew how."

Soap made a perfect bow, precisely the kind due to a viscount. "How do you do? The name is Phineas B. Crow."

Goodness, if Soap didn't *sound* exactly as if he were a gentleman. *He's been practicing the accent*. Sophronia wondered where he'd learned it in the first place.

Shocked into an instinctual reaction, Felix bowed back. "Felix Golborne, Viscount Mersey."

"Lord Mersey, I've heard of you." Soap looked over to where Sophronia skulked.

And he knows how to shorten the name of an aristocrat as well?

"Funny," said Felix, watching Soap's gaze rest on Sophronia, "but I hadn't heard of you."

"Some of us know how to keep secrets." With that, Soap ostentatiously returned the valve to Sophronia.

Felix colored. *So he wasn't supposed to tell anyone it's a guidance valve? Or is he embarrassed to catch Soap and me on terms of any intimacy?*

"Be careful," whispered Sophronia to Soap.

The sootie winked and turned back to Felix.

The boys squared off. Felix stood about half a head shorter than Soap, but then most people did. His clothes fit him perfectly, while Soap seemed to have been shoveled badly into his, with wrists and ankles sticking out.

"What can we possibly do for you, Lord Mersey?" asked Soap.

"I have no business with you."

"Good thing, too. We have enough bother keeping this ship afloat. We don't have time to pander to layabout toffs when there's real work to do."

Felix ignored this. "I wanted to look in on Miss Temminnick."

Soap said, "Well, she has had a number of unwelcome visitors this

evening."

"Oh, has she indeed?"

Soap declined to elaborate. As Felix had voiced his interest outright, the taller boy could not delay him further.

"Miss Sophronia," he said, "you have a visitor," as if he were her butler. "This boy wants to see you." He said it as though Felix were years his junior.

Felix turned the full force of his charm on Sophronia, presenting the back of his impeccable frock coat to Soap. "It is an odd place for us to meet, Ria, my dove."

Soap tensed.

Sophronia supposed she must play the game. "Very well, my lord, why tarry here at all? Your waistcoat will be smudged and your cravat gone gray; how will you survive such travesties?"

"For the pleasure of your glorious company, I should suffer a thousand smudges."

"Do they always talk like this?" Soap asked Dimity, loudly.

"Pretty much."

"It's revolting."

"I shouldn't let it worry you, Mr. Crow. She's only practicing."

Sophronia looked away from Felix. "And he's only playacting. Training to be a rake and toying with my poor, weak heart." But even as she said it, she was forced to face the fact that this could be a lie. *What a pickle. Maybe if I ignore his overtures, the messiness will go away?*

"Oh, now, Ria, you malign me. I'm as honest as a rose garden is beautiful."

"And as full of dung," replied Sophronia without missing a beat.

Dimity said appreciatively, "Such language."

Soap was looking equal parts impressed and disturbed by this banter. He added, "Aside which, don't you know, Lord Mersey, Miss Sophronia doesn't have a heart?"

Sophronia didn't show it, but the remark stung. She was very fond of Soap. She didn't want him to think her cold. She said to Felix, "My lord, how did you follow me?"

Felix didn't answer, which was reason enough to be wary. *He's only an evil genius in training. He shouldn't be able to track me, a prospective*

intelligencer.

“I need to know, my lord. It could cost me my life someday.”

Vieve stepped out of the shadows. “My fault again, I’m afraid,” she said, looking cheeky. “I told him how to climb and where to go, then left the climbing and the going to him.”

“Goodness, why?”

“He’s going to put a word in with the headmaster of Bunson’s for me.”

“What?” Sophronia was confused.

“Young Master Lefoux and I have struck a bargain,” said Felix. “I’d campaign for his admittance to Bunson’s, and he’d tell me were you went each evening.”

Sophronia digested the fact that Felix, evidently, didn’t know that Vieve was female. She contemplated revealing this to him out of spite, but Vieve must have had good reason for betraying Sophronia’s whereabouts. It was best to keep information as ammunition for when it might become useful, and not squander it on revenge. And, in the end, there was no *real* harm done in Felix following her.

One question did remain. “How did you know I went *anywhere* of an evening?”

“I might have seen you leave your chambers late one night.”

“You know where my chambers are?” Sophronia was shocked. A girl’s boudoir was sacred!

Felix issued her a crooked smile. “I’ve never seen the engine room of a floating school before.”

“I see. Well, thank you, Vieve.”

Vieve tried to explain. “I can’t lark about here forever. I’ve been thinking Bunson’s is a better place for me.”

Sophronia handed her traitorous friend back the mini-prototype. “Guidance valve,” she mouthed.

Vieve nodded, indicating she’d heard the name.

“What about Professor Shrimpdittle?” Sophronia was alluding to the fact that, as an old acquaintance of Professor Lefoux’s, Shrimpdittle knew Vieve’s true gender.

“I haven’t figured that out yet. May need your help to reassign him.”

“Oh? And here you betrayed me this very evening to both Dimity and Lord Mersey.”

Dimity took offense at being lumped together with a boy. “Wait a moment!”

Felix watched the exchange with amused eyes.

Vieve had the good grace to look embarrassed. “Yes, well, I thought we might come to an arrangement. If I leave for Bunson’s, I won’t need the obstructor anymore, will I?”

Vieve had found Sophronia’s weakness. “Fine, you rat, I’ll put some thought into a discrediting action.” Sophronia’s mind was already contemplating how one might get a professor dismissed from an evil genius training school.

Vieve spat on her hand and offered it to Sophronia. “Done!”

Sophronia sighed and shook it. Luckily she was wearing her black cotton spare gloves, the ones dedicated to visiting sooties.

“I think that’s enough excitement for one evening. Shall we head out?”

Soap said, “So soon?”

Vieve was dubious. “As a party of four?”

“Oh, you may take Dimity with you. Lord Mersey and I will go the normal route. I’d like to see his technique.”

Felix looked uncomfortable but schooled his expression to one of bland superiority and marched off to the hatch. Clearly, he was not as relaxed about climbing as he pretended.

Sophronia held back. “Don’t you worry, Soap. I’ll give him what for!”

Soap looked pleased. “You will? Oh, good. But, erm, what for?”

“Disrespecting you, of course. Ignoramus.”

Soap’s face fell. “Oh, now, miss. Please don’t. I don’t need you to defend me.”

“But your honor is at stake!”

“Honor’s for toffs. In that, at least, he’s right. I’m nothing but a lowly sootie.”

“But—”

“You wanna give him a lecture for some other reason, please do.”

Sophronia was disconcerted. What *else* had Felix done?

“Looking at you as if he wanted to spread you on toast and nibble!” Soap’s voice vibrated with disgust, or something more dangerous.

Sophronia didn’t know what to say to that, so she only nodded dumbly and scampered after Felix out the hatch.

Sophronia was none too thrilled to be stuck climbing. Vieve's method of getting around was faster and less strenuous. But exercise was good for her, and part of her wanted to show off for Felix—not to mention show him up.

If Lord Mersey was impressed by the smooth way she shot her hurlie and swung from balcony to balcony, he gave no indication. After an aborted attempt to assist her, as any gentleman would a woman into a carriage, he found she was more efficient than he, even in skirts, and hung back in an attitude of "ladies first."

Sophronia outdistanced him and, although she knew it was rude, decided to leave him eating petticoat fluff. If Felix had entertained any ideas of an assignation, they were quite thoroughly shredded.

"You're flirting with that boy shamelessly," accused Dimity, who was already undressed and abed when Sophronia entered their room.

"That's a lie! I'm not entirely certain I even *like* Lord Mersey. He's very involved in his own consequence."

"And why shouldn't he be? Son of a duke, long line of evil geniuses, even Picklemen in his pedigree. He is allowed to be arrogant. But I wasn't speaking of him. You flirt with him with aplomb and finesse. Lady Linette would be chuffed. In fact, I think your approach far outstrips that of Monique or Preshea. Insulting him and pretending you aren't interested; who'd have thought such a tactic might work?"

"Mademoiselle Geraldine," said Sophronia promptly. "She has advised the approach on a number of occasions." Sophronia puffed out her chest and assumed a mockery of their headmistress. "A lady of *qualit-tay* makes herself appear at all times *unwilling* and most of the time *unavailable*. Gentlemen adore the hunt." Sophronia frowned, considering her current circumstances. "Honestly, Dimity, I wasn't applying it intentionally, but I suppose Lord Mersey has had ladies after him most of his life. I must make for a nice change."

Dimity got out of bed to undo the buttons down the back of Sophronia's dress. "Regardless, it's Mr. Soap to whom I was referring. You'll break that poor boy's heart. He's leagues beneath you. Nothing can come of it."

"I won't!" Sophronia was stung. "I don't think of him at all in *that* way."

“You might be reduced to saying something quite blunt.”

Sophronia blushed at the very idea.

“At least stop canoodling with him.”

Sophronia was shocked by the accusation. “I’m not! There wasn’t one single canoodle!”

“You are most assuredly flirting. I’ve suspected it before, but now that I’ve visited the boiler room, I’m convinced: *flirting*.”

Sophronia pulled on her nightgown. *Perhaps Dimity is right. Perhaps I am being unfair to Soap. But I do so enjoy his company. Soap’s so much more fun and restful to be around than Felix. Or anyone else, really*.

“When did life get so complicated?” she wondered to Dimity.

“Boys,” said Dimity succinctly. “Good night.”

Interior Decoration

A faint knock sounded at the parlor door just as Sophronia was drifting off to sleep, exhausted. She climbed out of bed, assuming anyone knocking at three in the morning could only be wanting her. A sinking sensation in her stomach suggested it might even be Felix.

Agatha met her in the parlor.

"For you, is it?" asked the dumpy girl.

"What are you doing awake?"

"You think you're the only one who sleeps light?"

"Were *you* expecting someone?" This seemed, given Agatha's character, highly unlikely.

Agatha gave her a look that said exactly that.

Sophronia opened the door a crack.

It was not Felix Mersey, thank goodness. Instead, she found herself looking down at Vieve's pert little face.

"You want to cash in on our gentlemen's agreement now? I haven't had any time to plan!" protested Sophronia.

The young girl shook her head. "No, these things take ages to sort, I know that."

"Have you found out something about the mini-prototype?"

"Not as such. I still need to run more tests. Although I do think it involves Picklemen, if that Felix Mersey knew it was called a guidance valve."

"Oh, dear. Picklemen and possibly vampires as well?"

Vieve shrugged as much as to say that the two were always involved in any technological advancement, so why fuss? “But I thought you might like to see what they went out of their way to bring on board.”

Sophronia had nearly forgotten. “Of course! Soap said it was a special shipment.” She began to follow Vieve out of the room.

Agatha, who had been listening with interest, said timidly, “You aren’t going outside in your nightgown, Sophronia? What if someone catches you?”

“Loan me Sidheag’s duds?” asked Sophronia. “I’ll take the blame if she gets upset.”

Agatha puffed out her cheeks but then nodded, disappeared, and reappeared with a familiar set of shirt and trousers. Sometimes even Agatha had gumption. Sophronia put them on and knotted her hair at the base of her neck. She was supposed to put her hair up in rags each night, but she rarely found the time. Plus, the only person any good with curling rags was Monique. Sophronia wasn’t about to ask her for help, even at Lady Linette’s insistence.

She followed Vieve down into the lower part of the rear of the airship, where storage chambers thrummed to the loud hum of the massive propeller.

It was via this warehouse that Sophronia had first entered Mademoiselle Geraldine’s Academy for Young Ladies of Quality—an ignorant covert recruit. There was a massive hatch and a moving glass platform, used for loading students or goods. The cavernous storage chamber was lit only by a flickering orange glow coming through the slats from guidance engineering. There, specially trained sooties, greasers, and firemen manned the propeller’s boilers and engines.

The noise of the propeller allowed the girls to be less cautious with their footsteps, but they still hugged the wall. At the far end, near the propeller room, was a small shed. Usually it housed cleaning supplies, but these were now stacked outside. Inside, someone had lit a gas lamp and was talking quietly.

Sophronia held Vieve back. The propeller was loud, but if it was Professor Braithwope inside that shed, he might still be able to smell them.

Eventually, Sophronia decided to risk it, inching forward slowly, her bare feet whisper-soft. Vieve took her cues from the older girl. They

reached the side of the shed, and Sophronia pulled out her ear trumpet. She crouched low and pressed it against the small space at the bottom where wall met floorboards.

"… too bad these were delayed. We could have used this information months ago," Professor Braithwope was saying. "How could the intermediary let them all pile up like that?"

"She seized an opportunity to infiltrate flywaymen. The messages kept coming, but she was afloat, so no one was left to alert us. It wasn't until I realized we hadn't had a shipment that we thought to go after them ourselves." Of all the possible teachers with the vampire, it appeared to be Sister Mattie.

"Are they *all* from her?"

"No. She's our best, but even she is not that prolific."

"But all hers say the same thing, whot?"

"Indeed they do. The question is—how many are involved?"

The vampire's tone was resigned. "And why? They know we have to enter the results of the test into public record."

"Are we overlooking something, Aloysius? Are we certain this is only about the technology?"

"Isn't it always, whot?"

"I suppose we should head to bed, then. We aren't getting anything new."

Vieve and Sophronia dove to the back of the shed, squeezing in behind it.

The two teachers emerged, illuminated by a lantern Sister Mattie held high in one hand. She stood by while Professor Braithwope locked the door to the shed. Once finished with the task, the vampire tucked the key into his waistcoat pocket and turned to offer the lady his arm.

Then he stiffened, cocking his head to one side. "Who's there?"

Sophronia and Vieve barely dared breathe.

"You might as well come out."

The two girls exchanged terrified looks, and then Vieve got a very set expression. "You stay," she mouthed at Sophronia. "I owe you."

Vieve unclipped the obstructor from about her wrist and passed it over. Then she carefully nicked one finger with the sharp edge of her shirt pin, drawing blood. *She's hiding my smell,* Sophronia realized. Vampires' senses

could be befuddled by fresh blood. Then Vieve stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jodhpurs, pulled her cap over her eyes, and sauntered out.

"What ho, Professors," she said jovially. Just as though she strolled about the ship at all hours turning up where least wanted—which, Sophronia supposed, was exactly what she did do.

The vampire looked none too pleased to see her.

"Oh, it's only little Genevieve," said Sister Mattie, relief in her voice. *Really*, thought Sophronia, *she ought to be better at hiding her emotions*. Then again, acting was Lady Linette's speciality.

"You are a scamp, aren't you, whot?" said the vampire, not relaxing. "How much did you hear?"

"Not much."

Sister Mattie said wisely, "A little lovage is a dangerous thing."

"I think you mean knowledge," corrected Vieve.

"No, I do *not*." Sister Mattie was very confident on the subject of herbs.

Quicker than the eye could follow, even had it been broad daylight, the vampire reached out and grabbed Vieve's ear.

"Ouch!"

"What did you hear?" he repeated, sounding much more vampirelike than Sophronia had thought he could. His mustache even managed to quiver with malice.

"Something about a technology, and whether they were interested or not, and how many."

"Anything else?"

Sister Mattie clucked. "Now, now, Professor, don't damage the girl."

Vieve began to struggle. The vampire lifted her by the ear. She struck and kicked out. "Stop it, sir! There's nothing more, I promise."

That's odd behavior, thought Sophronia. Not odd for a ten-year-old girl, but Vieve rarely acted like an actual ten-year-old.

Vieve began to whimper and scrabbled more, raking at the front of the vampire's chest. "Lemme go, that hurts!"

It's quite a show, thought Sophronia, *but it's definitively a show*. Vieve was no more an actress than Sister Mattie. *What is she up to?*

"You realize I will have to report this transgression to your aunt?" The vampire set Vieve down.

Vieve sullenly rubbed her abused ear. "I suppose so."

“Oh, you do, do you? You’re too young to have transgressions. Now, here, wrap this handkerchief around that finger and come along.”

With that, the two professors, trailing a protesting Vieve, walked the long stretch across the warehouse floor and left, shutting the door behind them.

The smell of blood, all that propeller noise, and Vieve’s whining had effectively hidden Sophronia’s presence. She wondered if the same trick would work on a werewolf. *I must really learn more about the limits of supernatural abilities*. She sent a thought of thanks after Vieve. *I guess that’s a fair exchange for betraying my sootie visits to Dimity and Felix*.

She was mystified as to why the girl had thrown such a tantrum. She felt around the floor where the vampire had shaken Vieve. Sure enough, as she patted, she happened upon the key to the shed. Professor Braithwope had put it into his waistcoat pocket, and Vieve had thrown her fit in order to pinch it for Sophronia. *Blast it,* Sophronia thought, *now Vieve is one up on me and I owe her! I shall have to put some serious thought to getting rid of Shrimpdittle so she can go become an evil genius*.

Sophronia put the key in the shed door and turned it slowly. The bolt clicked over, but if the cargo was that important, there would be more than a lock guarding it. Inside Sophronia could just make out that the shed was set up like a lady’s sitting room. There were multiple low couches, a very ornate chaise longue—all brass fittings and cream brocade—and fifty or more embroidered throw cushions. There was even a tea trolley near the door, complete with teapot and a plate of small cakes. She had no doubt those were from Mademoiselle Geraldine’s collection. Sophronia was not fooled by all the detail; no one set up a shed like this except to try to hide something in plain sight. She checked the doorway for traps. She ran her hand cautiously along the jamb on each side and down the center for a trip wire. *Nothing. Most atypical*.

Cautiously, she moved into the room.

The ornate chaise across the way emitted a puff of steam from under its brocade ruffle and whirled to life. It had an affronted aspect, as though it were a mother goose and the decorative pillows strewn all about were its eggs.

The chaise charged Sophronia, who leapt to one side, bounced up onto a couch, and, in lieu of any other weapon, grabbed one of the cushions.

The chaise twirled on one of its legs, tassels flying. Its gilt decoration and upholstery disguised copious elaborate mechanisms. It faced Sophronia again, skittering from one side to the other, unable to jump up after her and unwilling to charge and break the other couch.

Sophronia waved the pillow at it.

The chaise puffed smoke out a back slat and waved two tassels with obvious menace.

Luckily, it didn't seem to be able to sound a whistle alarm like a maid mechanical, nor a trumpeting blast like a soldier mechanical, but it was not going to let her out of the shed, either.

Its protocol probably dictates that it hold infiltrators here and not allow them to escape until someone checks. I could be at this all night.

Sophronia glanced around. There was no way out except the door by which she'd entered, and the chaise had that defended. She couldn't see any weapons mounted on the angry furnishing. In fact, it seemed nothing more than a rather cushy—albeit autonomous—couch. Nevertheless, it looked as though it would crush her if she went for the door. It was certainly fast and heavy enough.

Sophronia considered firing her hurlie and swinging over the chaise and out like a circus acrobat, but there was no hooking point. Plus, she would not have gotten what she came for: the information Professor Braithwope and Sister Mattie had extracted from this room. There must be messages stashed somewhere in the arrangement of the shed.

They were at an impasse, Sophronia and the chaise longue.

She feinted left and the sofa followed. She feinted right. It mirrored her on the ground. She made as if to throw the pillow, and it huffed out smoke in indignation and reared on its two stubby back legs, fighting the air with its forelegs like an angry horse.

Sophronia frowned. They had been taught various forms of secret communication—quilting, knitting, crocheting, and lacework code. Perhaps the embroidery on the pillows conveyed information from active intelligencers trained at Mademoiselle Geraldine's. If it contained communiqués from London, this would make for important cargo indeed.

Ignoring the enraged chaise, which was holding position, Sophronia squinted at the cushion she held. It was too dark to make out any of the crewelwork. The code was probably contained in the colors and numbers of

threads as well as the details of each image. It'd be impossible to interpret the meaning without a companion cypher book. Perhaps Sister Mattie had the cypher memorized and that's why she'd been along. Whatever the case, there was no point in Sophronia's stealing a pillow, tempting as it might be.

Sophronia suddenly remembered that Vieve had loaned her the obstructor. She wasn't certain it would work on a mechanical without a track, but it was worth a try. She aimed at the perturbed furniture and let loose a silent blast. The sofa froze. It suffered this indignity with an aura of perturbation. Sophronia dropped the pillow, jumped down, and then leapt onto another couch before the chaise came back to life.

It whirred into animation, let out a puff of affronted smoke, and turned to charge Sophronia at her new location.

Sophronia blasted it again and repeated the process until she was perched precariously atop the tea trolley, which sat closest to the door.

She hit the chaise with one last obstructor blast before swinging herself around the jamb, crashing open the door with both feet, and landing on one knee in the warehouse beyond.

The sofa clattered back into motion and came after her but was confined to the shed. It stopped in the doorway, glaring at her and shaking threatening tassels—if an object without eyes can be said to glare. Sophronia felt sorry for the chaise longue, but she wasn't going to risk being caught in order to mollify a gaudy piece of furniture.

The next morning Mademoiselle Geraldine's left its Dartmoor home and began to float out over more populated areas. The students were reminded curtly at breakfast by Sister Mattie that "people who live in dirigibles should not throw chamber pots." The remark was met with censure by Mademoiselle Geraldine but appeared to have been predicated on action taken by the visiting boys, who snickered knowingly.

The propeller could no longer be activated during the day, for it blew too much of their cover away. They lost speed and bobbed up and down most of the time, trying to catch breezes heading toward London. Suddenly, Sophronia understood the excitement over Giffard's accomplishment. Riding those impossibly high-up aether currents would enable them to

move with both speed and stealth. At present, only on cloudy days and at night could they could fire up the propeller and move with any kind of purpose.

That first day they had a lesson with Sister Mattie on the middle squeak deck on how to throw poison with accuracy. They were practicing with water in little perfume bottles. Sophronia asked if isinglass might be mixed with some of the poisons to turn them to jelly, allowing for less dispersal when hurled.

Sister Mattie went into a long diatribe about how different toxins changed when gelatinous, which had them all standing around dumbly staring at her for a quarter of an hour.

Then they heard “Clear the deck!” yelled in an excited voice, tinged with the hint of a French accent.

In accordance with their training, the young ladies scattered, running to the side or rolling away or, in Sophronia’s case, leaping over the railing to hang suspended on the outside of the ship. She did it with the ease of a girl overly familiar with balconies. Her leap and twist placed her staring back in at the deck, so she was in a perfect position to observe Vieve when she charged across it.

The young girl had what looked like ice skates strapped to her feet, only these had multiple wheels on them and some kind of tiny propeller. They were manipulated by a large ball Vieve clutched in one hand. She would tilt the ball to one side or the other to steer, somehow communicating with the skates wirelessly. The skates were clearly firing at a much faster speed than anticipated. Vieve went bucketing all over the deck, weaving from one side to the other, eventually crashing into the well-padded form of Sister Mattie.

Vieve tumbled backward onto her bony bottom. Unprotected by skirts and petticoats, she fell hard, her skate-covered feet sticking up in the air, the wheels still going furiously.

Sister Mattie also went backward, making an “oof” noise.

Sophronia was the first one at her side.

The nun was nonplussed at having been attacked by a small French cannonball. “Dear me, dear me, dear me. My goodness gracious! Who? What?”

Vieve remained lying on her back with feet in the air, apparently unable to turn off her contraptions. She said cheerfully, “What ho, Sister Mattie.

Apologies. Only testing a new invention."

Sophronia solicitously helped Sister Mattie to stand and brushed her off. "Are you all right, Sister?"

"Thank you very much, Miss Temminnick. Only surprised, not injured."

"May I get you a glass of water or smelling salts?" Sophronia was fond of Sister Mattie.

"No, thank you, dear, very thoughtful." The roly-poly teacher turned to glare at Vieve.

The other girls wandered back over. They surrounded the collapsed Vieve and stared down at her.

"You are a positive menace," pronounced Monique.

"I don't know why Lady Linette permits you on board," added Preshea.

"Professor Lefoux is an able enough instructor, but that can hardly be worth your presence," continued Monique.

"Useless creature," said Preshea.

Vieve only looked up at them, lips pursed. Her green eyes were wide and shocked by this attack. She was accustomed to being ignored by the students.

Sophronia was having none of it. "Enough. Things go wrong with science. It's the way of it. You're hardly upset that class has been disturbed, so there's no point in pretending you are."

Preshea sputtered at this unexpected defense.

Monique was rarely at a loss for words. "Oh, ho! Sophronia appears to have herself a little pet."

"Ladies!" Sister Mattie recovered her aplomb. "Enough." She turned to Vieve. "Miss Lefoux, do get control of your shoes and take yourself elsewhere. You realize I will have to speak to your aunt about this incident?"

Sophronia wondered if that weren't Vieve's intent. Was she trying to make herself as inconvenient as possible? Perhaps to convince her aunt to let her infiltrate the boys' school? After all, there were two other squeak decks, both vacant. She didn't have to test her foot thingamabobs here.

"My sputter-skates," corrected Vieve.

"What?"

"Sputter-skates, not *shoes*."

Sophronia, delicately testing the waters, said, "They look like the kind

of thing boys might appreciate."

Vieve twinkled up at her. "Exactly." She sat up, carefully balanced on her backside so the sputter-skates didn't touch the deck. Then she reached down and pulled a small lever. The skates, true to their name, sputtered and died. The wheels stopped moving at last.

"I think," said Vieve to no one in particular, "I ought to install a safety shutoff."

"Do you indeed?" Dimity was droll.

Sophronia offered Vieve a hand up.

Vieve balanced precariously on her now quiet sputter-skates.

"Sister Mattie, could Sophronia help me over to those stairs, please?"

Sister Mattie, eager to be rid of the child and get back to lessons, waved her off. "By all means. Miss Temminnick, attend Miss Lefoux, if you would be so kind."

Sophronia grabbed her friend's bony shoulders and wheeled her across the deck.

When they were outside of listening distance, Vieve shoved the ball she'd been using to steer into Sophronia's hand. "Look at that."

It was leather and metal with a catch on one side. Sophronia opened it to find the mini-prototype—more properly, the crystalline guidance valve—nested inside.

"It transmits protocols via aetheric particles!" crowed Vieve. "Or at least I think so. The original prototype was designed for long-distance point-to-point communication, like a wireless telegraph. But this little beauty can be used for point-to-machine commands. The theory is, it uses ambient aether in normal atmosphere, but it would probably work better, faster, and over larger distances within the aetherosphere."

Sophronia was awed. "You think that's how Giffard is negotiating the aether?" She paused. "He would have to have very quick response times from all over his ship to float those crazy currents."

Vieve nodded, eyes shining. "These guidance valves are designed to work better up there. That's why he had to wait. We needed to develop and distribute this technology to him. Airships have been ready for ages. It's the navigation they couldn't master."

"Professor Lefoux was testing it with the oddgob machine, and when I removed it, she couldn't get the machine to shut down properly."

“Exactly. And I think she had it configured wrong. She was trying to send the signal to it. I’m using it the other way around. Plus, this school floats high enough up that aether particles are prevalent. Don’t you see? The applications are endless. You could have multiple valves in a controller hub going to machines all over the ship. In theory you could even use it to remotely control mechanicals. I’m so stupid—last fall I thought it was going to be used for human-to-human communication. I was wrong. These things are meant to transmit protocols!” She looked down at her skates. “Of course, it’s only on and off. And in my case, the off didn’t work. But the very idea!”

“Fifty percent effective?” Sophronia wondered who was controlling this technology. Mademoiselle Geraldine’s had an unknown patron; was he or she in on this? What about the British government? Bunson’s had Picklemen ties—they had wanted the original prototype. And then there was the pillow shipment, not to mention Professor Braithwope and Monique’s talk of vampires.

They had reached the staircase and could not delay matters to discuss further, as Sister Mattie was watching. Hastily, Sophronia handed Vieve back the guidance valve and said, “Thank you for last night, by the way. It was most helpful. Come by my quarters during luncheon? I feel a terrible headache coming on that may require me to rest this afternoon.”

“I’ll filch some sandwiches,” said Vieve.

“Excellent.”

Finding Fortune

How will you infiltrate Bunson's without being found out as you get older?" Sophronia asked Vieve, gesticulating elegantly at the front part of her own corset.

"I come from a long line of bony women, so I shouldn't think that will be a problem. And I managed to fool even you, until you were told."

"True, but I was more thinking about the fact that some of them must already know you as *you* at Bunson's."

"Only Shrimpdittle, and if you can deal with him, I should be in form. So long as my aunt keeps mum, I don't see as there should be any real difficulty."

"If you say so."

"I know so. And I have a wonderful fake mustache I shall begin sporting in a few years' time. That will fool most anyone. Mustaches are like that."

"You'd make a terrible intelligencer," said Sophronia at that outrageous statement.

"I know. Hence the reason I want to infiltrate Bunson's, which is far more amenable to my personality."

"And contact between the schools? How will you handle that?"

"It is more amicable now than it has been before. But…" She trailed off, her small face thoughtful.

"You don't think good relations will last?"

"You serve different masters."

Sophronia sat up. "Do you know who is the patron of Mademoiselle

Geraldine's?"

Vieve shook her head. "No, but I know it isn't the Picklemen, and they're the backbone of Bunson's. Those who aren't Picklemen don't get along with them, so…" She shrugged her conclusion.

Sophronia didn't think much of the Picklemen herself. "In that case, are you certain you want to go *there*? There must be other evil genius schools."

"None as good as Bunson's. It's a feeder to École des Arts et Métiers, the *best* university. Besides, I don't mind a Pickleman or two. They have the funds and an interest in technology. Do you think it's them Professor Braithwope was referencing the other night in the shed as wanting the technology?"

"Must be. Sister Mattie said the intermediary had gone to infiltrate flywaymen, we know the Picklemen are mixed up with them, and… wait a moment, what will I do about Bumbersnoot with you gone? Who will look after him?"

Vieve shrugged. "It's time you learned mechanimal maintenance, if you will insist on carrying him everywhere like he's a toy."

Sophronia grinned at her pet, who was lounging on the end of the couch, wearing lace and ruffles. "Oh, he doesn't mind, do you, Bumbersnoot?"

Tick-tock, tick-tock went Bumbersnoot's tail in apparent agreement.

"Come here, you charmer," said Vieve, scooping up the mechanimal and removing his reticule attire. "I'll show you how to clean and oil him and leave a few tools. You should try it before I relocate, in case you have questions."

Sophronia prepared to be instructed. If Vieve was set on leaving, Sophronia had better learn to fend for herself in the matter of technology. *Funny*, she thought, *I used to love to take things apart*.

"Oh, ho ho, look who's all chummy." Monique came into the room and cast herself in an unladylike manner into an armchair.

"I thought you had a terrible headache, Sophronia. You don't look like you're ill," accused Preshea, following Monique.

Sidheag, Agatha, and Dimity trailed into the parlor after them.

"Oh, Preshea, what do you care? You had Lord Mersey all to yourself at luncheon," said Dimity.

Vieve looked at the fashionable young ladies surrounding her. She issued an ironic little bow, packed up her things, and made good her escape.

“I don’t know why you associate with that brat,” said Monique. “Older girls shouldn’t patronize younger ones.”

No one replied, but there was a collective arching of eyebrows. After all, Monique was forced to spend most of her time associating with them, and even Sophronia—the eldest of the bunch—was three years her junior.

Monique wrinkled her nose, as if smelling the absurdity in her own words. She quickly moved the subject on. “Preshea, darling, is it only I who have noticed, or has this whole trip to London become excessively dull?”

“Don’t fret, dear Monique. You still have your party to plan.” Preshea was all optimism.

Monique brightened. “Oh, yes, the party. How droll of me to forget. Should we consider refreshments?”

Preshea and Monique then spent a quarter of an hour discussing the delights of the upcoming ball. They listed all the diversions and delicacies in a manner that emphasized the fact that no one else in the room would get to sample any.

Agatha played her role painfully well, pretending interest. *Really*, thought Sophronia, *she is a better intelligencer than the school gives her credit*.

Sophronia and her friends remained unaffected by the barbs. She and Sidheag played tiddlywinks while Dimity knitted. Dimity was fond of knitting and was currently attempting to craft small yellow booties for Bumbersnoot. She claimed this was practice for her future as a charitable lady of means. Sophronia secretly worried that the mechanimal would slide all over the floor—not to mention, why did a metal dog need warm feet?—but the act was kindly meant.

Then, in a twist of topic, Preshea and Monique began to discuss boys. “Lord Mersey, of course, is the cream on the cake. Getting him to attend can only be to the betterment of all concerned.”

Monique was confident. “I’m assured he will come. As will Lord Dingleproops. Of course, we can’t have young Vullrink, not after last night’s supper. Imagine using a knife for fish? And Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott is right out.”

Preshea nodded sagely. “Too young?”

“Too ill connected.” Monique looked pointedly at Dimity.

Dimity glanced up from her needles. “He’ll only thank you for it.

Pillover hates parties."

"Oh, wonderful. It's always so nice to know the unwelcome are also uncaring of their social standing," sneered Monique. She probably would have gone on with her commentary until their next lesson, but the perimeter alarm trumpeted.

Dimity put down her knitting.

The girls stayed in their parlor, as they had been instructed. Even Sophronia, who was inclined to take to the hull to investigate, remained seated. With all the manufactured fog, it would be impossible to see who approached, a fact that was worrying in and of itself. If someone had managed to spot and attack the school despite their cloud disguise, that someone had superior technology.

They waited with bated breath for the ship to shake with cannon fire, for the fateful lean and sway of a balloon collapsing. Nothing happened. They listened for the sound of timber splitting. Still nothing. In short order, the trumpeting stopped with no apparent reaction from ship, mechanicals, or staff.

"Must have been a false alarm," said Dimity into the ensuing silence.

The girls, with nothing better to do, prepared for their next lesson. Even Monique was sobered by the strange experience.

They had foreign languages and lip-reading with Lady Linette next. None of the boys were present. Apparently, gentlemen didn't require foreign tongues. They moved from there on to tea and subterfuge with Mademoiselle Geraldine. Since the headmistress had no idea of the true nature of her own school, the exact kind of subterfuge was always assigned by one of the other teachers. Today, however, Lady Linette informed them that this time they should know what to do when they arrived.

Excited by the mystery, the girls hurried through the hallways to be met in the tassel section by Professor Shrimpdittle, trailing a sullen-looking Lord Dingleproops, Lord Mersey, and Pillover Plumleigh-Teignmott. The ten of them entered Mademoiselle Geraldine's quarters together.

As ever, the walls were lined with shelves of fake pastries, and the headmistress rose to welcome them from behind a large table set with a full

tea service. She had known to expect a larger-than-normal gathering, for there were twelve place settings. Her décolletage heaved with appreciation. Mademoiselle Geraldine loved company.

Sitting next to her, in the place of honor, was an elderly female. She wore eccentric dress for a woman in the later part of life. Her wild gray hair was loose and her forehead bound over with a colorful scarf, like a sky pirate. Her jewelry was bronze and gold and more prevalent than Dimity's at her most sparkly. The stranger's complexion was tan in a manner that young ladies of quality were cautioned against. Her eyes were lined thickly with kohl. Her attire seemed to be composed utterly of brightly colored scarves tied in layers.

Dimity gasped in appreciation. "A fortune-teller!"

"How very esoteric, Mademoiselle G.!" crowed Lord Dingleproops, striding up to the headmistress to clap her on the shoulder, rather as a man would approach a fellow at his club. Mademoiselle Geraldine looked at him as though he were a collapsed soufflé, and he backed away hastily.

The girls tittered in elation. Even Pillover looked pleased, and he was rarely pleased by anything.

We didn't go down low to retrieve her, thought Sophronia. *How did she get on board?*

"Very good, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. We have indeed been graced with the presence of a fortune-teller."

Sophronia wondered, "Did you set off the alarm?"

The fortune-teller's eyes sharpened on her.

Sophronia realized she had revealed more of her personality with that one question than was healthy. She was, after all, the only one who'd jumped straight to logistics rather than the exciting possibility of having her palm read.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated. Madame Spetuna has been retained for the evening to tell your fortunes." Mademoiselle Geraldine was wearing a lightweight muslin gown of chartreuse with cream stripes. It was a dress that better suited one of her students. Each stripe was patterned with pink roses. There was fringe all up the length of the sleeves and about the low square neckline that displayed the headmistress's assets to great effect. Said assets heaved as she inhaled, and Professor Shrimpdittle looked as though he might faint.

She continued, “Given that there are ten of you, we must keep the readings brief. So tuck in quickly to the nibbly bits while we do so, and don’t stand on ceremony. If Miss Pelouse would pour the tea? Miss Buss, why don’t you sit first?”

Preshea took the seat closest to the fortune-teller with alacrity.

Madame Spetuna looked her over. “Ze cards, I think, for you, dark child.”

Preshea was made to pick five cards from a deck and lay them out carefully on the damask tablecloth. Madame Spetuna rearranged them a few times before settling on a pattern she liked.

This must be today’s subterfuge challenge. We are to ensure that the fortune-teller doesn’t reveal anything to Mademoiselle Geraldine about our real training. Sophronia, nibbling a biscuit, sat back to watch. She wondered about the fortune-teller. *Does she know what we do here? Or does she, like Mademoiselle Geraldine, think it is a normal, albeit floating, finishing school?*

“Ah,” breathed Madame Spetuna, “this is most interesting. Most interesting indeed. You, my child, will marry well. More than once. A charmed life, so long as you weave a tight net, little spider.” The lady retrieved the cards and shuffled them back together into one stack in an attitude of dismissal.

Taking this as a sign her fortune was complete, Preshea stood. Looking particularly pleased with life, she passed over a few coins and gave Madame Spetuna a nice curtsy.

Mademoiselle Geraldine was fanning herself. “Oh, dear, oh, dear, Miss Buss. Let us hope it is widowhood and not”—she whispered the next word—“*divorce* that leads to your multiple marriages.”

Preshea sat and sipped from a china cup. “I shouldn’t worry, Headmistress. I am tolerably certain it will be widowhood.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine was reassured by this. Preshea’s future husbands probably wouldn’t have been. Even Lord Dingleproops, ordinarily unconcerned by those around him, looked apprehensively at the beautiful dark-haired girl. She gave him a wicked smile and a coy lowering of the lashes.

Reel it in, Preshea. Sophronia glanced nervously at the headmistress. But Mademoiselle Geraldine was waving the next victim forward.

Dimity took the danger seat. “I admire your fashion sense,” she told the fortune-teller with absolute sincerity.

Madame Spetuna tucked a lock of hair behind her ear—in which there were *three* earrings!

Dimity’s eyes sparkled.

“For you, the palm,” said Madame Spetuna.

Wide-eyed, Dimity presented the fortune-teller with both hands. Madame Spetuna bent over them, the many rings on her fingers flashing as she traced the lines.

Sophronia heard Monique whisper to Preshea, “I wouldn’t allow such a dirty common creature to touch me!”

Madame Spetuna gave no indication of having heard. “You wish for a simple life, magpie. You will not get it. You will choose, many times, between loyalty and peace. A terrible choice.” She looked up at Dimity, her dark eyes sad. “I am sorry.”

Dimity nodded, her round face somber. “That’s all right, Madame Spetuna. I always suspected it might be so.”

Since she had forgotten her reticule, Dimity slid off one of her own many bracelets and gave it to the fortune-teller. They exchanged the smiles of kindred spirits.

Mademoiselle Geraldine called Monique. The older girl hid her excitement with a haughty expression. She sat and took up the cards without Madame Spetuna suggesting she do so.

“You are attracted to the cards, moonbeam? Good. It is always better when one is summoned.”

Once the icy blonde had selected five cards, the fortune-teller bent over them for a time. “You will never be as important as you think you are. That is all.”

“What do you know, old woman?” Monique stood with a sneer and left without offering a gratuity.

When she went to sit, Mademoiselle Geraldine rapped the girl’s knuckles hard with a fan. “Manners!”

Monique, without further comment, curtsied to the fortune-teller and returned to her tea and Preshea’s questionable counsel.

Then it was Agatha’s turn. The redhead asked, in a hesitant voice, if her fortune might be told privately. Sophronia thought to warn her that this

might not be permitted by Lady Linette under the subterfuge clause, but there wasn't time. Madame Spetuna agreed.

Agatha was also given the cards. After her selection was laid on the table, Madame Spetuna whispered in her ear. Whatever Agatha's fortune, it cheered the chubby girl. She was almost animated and passed over a ridiculously large sum to Madame Spetuna in thanks.

Sophronia wished she were a fortune-teller. It would be an admirable way to inspire discomfort. Professor Shrimpdittle, for example, might be shaken into distrusting Bunson's. *Then again… I wonder how much it costs to buy a fortune?* Sophronia assessed her own meager funds. Then while Agatha bumbled back to her seat, Sophronia pulled out a scrap of paper and a bit of graphite from her reticule. *Three shillings*, she wrote, *to imply that Bunson's headmaster no longer trusts Prof S.* There was no time to code the note; she simply had to hope the fortune-teller was capable.

Sidheag assumed the seat with a certain bravado. She held out her hands without being asked.

"You have done this before, wolf child?" Madame Spetuna's eyes were sharp on Sidheag's face.

Sidheag nodded.

"Then what I tell you will be no different. You know your fate and you cannot escape it. Why do you dally here pretending to be tame?"

Sidheag nodded and stood to resume her seat. Her curtsy was perfunctory, but the fortune-teller did not take offense. It was almost as if she knew Sidheag's curtsies were always perfunctory.

Finally Madame Spetuna gestured to Sophronia.

Sophronia went eagerly. *Suspicious nonsense, of course, but terribly fun suspicious nonsense. I wish Soap could have his fortune told. He'd love it*.

Madame Spetuna looked her up and down. She said, "The palm, I think, for you."

Sophronia offered both hands.

The fortune-teller seized them by the wrists. Her touch was soft and dry, and she smelled of exotic spices Sophronia could not place. *I must train my nose*, she thought. *Such information could be important, particularly if a given smell is associated with an enemy or an informant*.

"Even now, you think only in terms of the game. You are well chosen, little bird. Or are you a stoat?" Madame Spetuna bent forward, looking even

harder at Sophronia's palms. She was close enough for Sophronia to feel the woman's breath on her skin. "Give your heart wisely." She paused a long time over one particular wrinkle. "Oh, child, you will end the world as we know it." Madame Spetuna swallowed and then turned Sophronia's hands over and placed them, palm down, on the table. She leaned forward, pressing them into the tablecloth as though she might rub out what she had seen.

It was an admirable performance. Sophronia thought she ought to applaud. Everyone was silent in awe. Sophronia looked over at Felix. He was making a face.

Then Monique giggled. "Stoat, of course Sophronia's a stoat."

Mademoiselle Geraldine recovered her composure. "What a very odd fortune, Miss Temminnick. What game could she possibly be referring to?"

"Oh, Headmistress, we have been playing loo these last few nights. Perhaps it is that?" Sophronia lied easily.

Mademoiselle Geraldine looked relieved. "Oh, yes, indeed. Now, which of the gentlemen would like to go next?"

Sophronia reached into her reticule and passed the fortune-teller a shilling and the note. Since handling and exchanging money was always an embarrassment, everyone made a point of not really watching the gratuity.

Sophronia pretended to get her skirt caught in the chair as she rose. In a flurry of long sleeves, she bent and almost tipped Madame Spetuna's teacup over. Under cover of this, the fortune-teller opened and read the note.

By the time Sophronia had sorted herself, and the chair, out—Mademoiselle Geraldine reprimanding her for such unladylike clumsiness—the note had vanished, and Madame Spetuna was giving Sophronia a funny look.

Sophronia arched one eyebrow. She'd been practicing that expression for days; it was a very intelligencer sort of skill, and she felt she ought to know how to do it. Her eyebrow twitched slightly and didn't arch gracefully, but it got her point across.

The fortune-teller nodded, almost imperceptibly.

Pillover assumed the seat. "It's all nonsense, of course."

Madame Spetuna used the cards on him. "You are greater than the sum of your parts," she said.

Pillover looked doubtfully down at his tubby form. Sophronia wondered

at a woman dressed in scarves quoting Aristotle.

Madame Spetuna continued. “And you will never make your father happy. Stop trying.”

Pillover drooped.

Lord Dingleproops was next. “What a lark!”

“Wager to win, my lord, not to lose.”

“That’s all you have to say to me?”

“Wager any more and you could earn nothing at all.”

“You speak in riddles. Come on, Felix, saddle up.”

Felix assumed the seat, lounging back as was his insolent manner. His posture always gave the impression of not caring. About anything.

“You will not repeat your father’s mistakes. You will make new ones, all your own.”

“Very meaningful, Madame Spetuna. Of course, you might suspect any young man of being somewhat at odds with his father.” Felix’s eyes were narrowed.

Madame Spetuna only looked at him and adjusted the red-and-gold shawl around her shoulders.

The young viscount slouched over to take a seat opposite Sophronia and next to Monique. He ought to have talked to Monique, but instead he said to Sophronia, “Occult nonsense.”

Sophronia blinked at him, her green eyes very direct. “Well, are you, my lord?”

“Am I what?”

“At odds with your father?”

“Is that interest I see at last, Ria, my dove?” Felix smiled and turned to talk with Monique.

Sophronia was left in possession of the field but also feeling as though she had lost something. *I must get better at extracting information*. She considered. *Perhaps he requires feminine sympathy?*

Mademoiselle Geraldine, meanwhile, was urging Professor Shrimpdittle to have his fortune told. The good professor looked as if he would rather not, but the headmistress’s assets were clearly irresistible. He took the seat.

The fortune-teller grabbed his hand and said, “You have troubles at school? Your headmaster, he does not value your contribution? This trip, it is to get you away, to keep you from becoming important.”

Professor Shrimpdittle was agitated. “How do you know?”

“The spirits do not lie.”

“There are no spirits, not that science has proven. Ghosts, of course, but not spirits.”

“And yet, you fear I speak truth.”

Professor Shrimpdittle, attuned to the interest of his own students, fell silent. But the seed of suspicion had been planted.

Sophronia palmed three shillings, ready to complete her end of the bargain.

Madame Spetuna was about to say more when a knock on the door interrupted her.

“Who could that possibly be?” wondered Mademoiselle Geraldine. “Everyone knows I am in an important session.”

As if this tea were a meeting of Parliament.

“Come in,” yelled the headmistress.

Vieve poked her head in. “Sorry to disturb, Mademoiselle Geraldine, but I heard… oh, yes! Bully! A fortune-teller! May I have mine done, please?”

“Oh, I don’t think we have the time—”

Professor Shrimpdittle delicately interrupted the headmistress by rising to his feet. “By all means, let the child take my place.”

“If you don’t mind, Professor?”

Vieve trotted over and sat, little legs dangling.

The fortune-teller looked the scamp over and then looked at her palms briefly. “You are too young, as yet, to be fully formed. I can tell you only one thing. You are doomed to be lucky in matters of the head and unlucky in matters of the heart.”

Vieve grinned. “That’s good enough for me. I’d rather the first over the second.”

The fortune-teller shook her head sadly. “Which only proves how very young you are. And now I am fatigued. Mademoiselle Geraldine, if I might beg to rest before the next session?”

“Of course, my boudoir is just there. Please, avail yourself of the amenities.”

Madame Spetuna left the room with barely a nod at her former customers. She brushed past Sophronia and scooped up the three coins, which Sophronia held casually behind her seat back. It was as if Madame

Spetuna had been conducting covert operations her whole life. *Very professional*.

Sophronia turned to watch the fortune-teller retreat. The lady was quite short and she moved slowly. *I must remember that kind of garb as a good disguise. I should invest in colored scarves. My list of necessities gets ever longer. Perhaps I should also take the time to learn the basics of fortune-telling to go alongside*. It seemed a matter of making statements vague enough to be possibly true or predictions far enough in the future to be irrelevant.

The girls discussed their precognitive tea later that evening. After much analysis of their own fortunes, and everyone else's, Sophronia brought the subject around to the fortune-teller herself.

"Of course, she can't possibly be a *real* fortune-teller."

"Why ever not?" wondered Agatha, who wanted to believe in what she had been told. Whatever that had been. She was keeping her own counsel on the matter, despite Sophronia's wheedling.

"Don't you think she's one of ours?" Sophronia was casual in her assertions. "Returned to report in person on some dangerous matter?"

"Oh." Dimity was impressed. "You think she is an agent in disguise?"

Sophronia nodded.

"How do you know?" Sidheag demanded. "She realized that I'd had my fortune told before. She seemed genuine."

Sophronia did not want to tell them about the bribe and Professor Shrimpdittle. Discrediting a man's reputation was shabby work. They'd been taught a little of it, but it was considered dirty, even by Lady Linette. Character sabotage was morally hazardous to both parties. Sophronia was outside her depth with this operation, and her friends would take her to task for it. Especially as she was campaigning against an adult. Monique was one thing, but a teacher?

But there was something about the fortune-teller. A broach hidden among her scarves in the shape of an onion. The fact that she had come aboard in secret and while they were floating. Combined with something Sister Mattie had said about the intermediary, the one who missed the

shipment of pillows. *She had to take the opportunity to infiltrate the flywaymen*. Flywaymen were supposed to be very superstitious, so a fortune-teller would make a great cover for a spy.

How to Graciously Receive a Gift

The next morning at breakfast, there was a postal delivery waiting. Captain Niall was still gathering the mail diverted to inns along the way. The offerings consisted of flowery letters from beaux and the occasional familial missive. Sophronia watched Pillover carefully, pleased to see him receive a letter addressed in aggressive black script.

Their six-month review marks must have gone out, for the girls in Sophronia's year all had correspondences from parents. Agatha was in tears over hers. Sidheag snorted at her missive and lit it on fire with a nearby candle.

Dimity nibbled her lip over a boldly scripted note. "Oh, dear, Mummy is disappointed."

Her brother looked up from his own letter. "What did you do?"

"It's more what I didn't do."

Pillover stared gloomily into his giblet pie. "I suggest you become accustomed to the sensation. I showed interest in their work and they're still critical."

Dimity peeked over his shoulder. "Anything *significant*?"

Sophronia squinted at both of them. They were attracting attention with their sibling fussing. "Later!"

If Monique's parents cared that she'd been sent down, she showed no sign. Instead, she said in a loud voice to Preshea, "See? Daddy has written to the trustees, questioning Lady Linette's leadership. That should yield interesting results. Oh, look, and Mama has rented Walsingham House

Hotel's Tea Room for my coming-out ball! It is not quite so grand as I had hoped, but…"

"Oh, but it is very pretty and centrally located."

"True, true, dear Preshea. Mayfair is the *height* of fashion."

Sophronia saw Monique stash away two other letters. Letters that had already been opened, their wax seals cracked. Monique's hands trembled as she stuffed them into her reticule.

Sophronia had expected a message of congratulations from her own family, assuming that they had been told of her achievements in the matter of oddgob tests. But there was nothing.

They returned to their parlor after breakfast to find two large dress packages waiting.

Monique pounced with a squeal of pleasure. "My new ball gown, already! How exciting. Oh, no. They are addressed to *Sophronia*. Who would have guessed you ever got new clothes? I certainly should not."

Nor, thought Sophronia, *should I*.

She pulled the ribbon and opened the top box. There was a note in her mother's tidy handwriting. "Your father and I are thrilled with your results, and with your sudden interest in fashionable attire. We hope the measurements are still sound."

Inside was a day dress of royal-blue-and-black brocade. Its pagoda sleeves boasted modest black fringe, but otherwise the gown was unadorned. The fabric was lovely, and the simple cut allowed it to shine. It had a high neckline, giving it a mature aura. Sophronia wondered if her mother had ordered the gown for herself and then been displeased with the vibrancy of the color. It was not a dress Mrs. Temminnick might ordinarily have approved for a daughter, which made Sophronia like it all the more.

She held it up for the others to see.

"Oooo," admired Dimity.

"It's not something she would usually send." Sophronia was careful to look skeptical.

"Oh, is it not customary for her to actually spend money on you?" Preshea wondered, drawn into admiring the dress despite herself.

Monique's nose wrinkled. "It's terribly adult."

Dimity said, "Perhaps we might get hold of some black velvet ribbon and create military details up the front—to make it a little less simple."

Sophronia liked the simplicity, but she didn't want to crush Dimity's decorative dreams. "Perhaps."

Dimity clapped her hands in excitement. "Let's see the other one!"

The other box was larger. Sophronia dipped in to produce not one, not two, but three bodices and two large, fluffy skirts. This gown was of soft and filmy sage-green muslin. The overskirt dipped and swooped like curtains. The underskirt was a darker shade of the green, with a scalloped edge. There was a good deal of detail work put in at the hem, stripes as well as embroidery. It had a wide sash and, unless Sophronia was very mistaken, could be worn without the overskirt for a plainer look. Of the three bodices, one was a heavily fringed, low-cut evening style, with a cinched belt sporting a pretty center clasp; the second was for visiting and had narrow sleeves and a button front; and the third was a crossover fichu that could be arranged like a shawl over the evening top or as a cross-front variation on the visiting version on colder days.

"Three dresses in one," said Sidheag. Even she was moved to comment on the peculiarity. "How very practical."

"How very thrifty" was Monique's comment.

Sophronia loved it, but she knew better than to say so in Preshea's hearing, or raspberry cordial would be spilled all down the skirts the first time she wore it out. So she said, "I'm not sure about the color."

Dimity was not so reticent. "It will bring out your eyes beautifully. I've heard of this, you know. It's called a *robe à transformation*, and it's the very latest *thing* in Paris." She said this for Monique's benefit.

"So optimistic of your mother to include a ball gown option," said Monique, smiling sweetly.

"Monique is right." Sophronia turned to Dimity. "I doubt I'll get to wear that bodice, but it was very kind of Mumsy to think of me. She must have spent her own personal dress allowance on it."

The other girls gasped.

"Sophronia, don't talk of such menial things!" reprimanded Agatha softly. Agatha found money terribly embarrassing, as she had so very much of it.

Perhaps Agatha would consider being my sponsor in the intelligencer game, thought Sophronia. *If she decides against taking it up herself, of course*.

She was rather gleeful later, putting her new gowns away reverently in her wardrobe.

“You like them, don’t you?” accused Dimity.

“I shall like them better when I have a chance to sew in hidden pockets and holsters, and determine a way to hang my chatelaine from those cloth belts.”

“Yes, you like them.” Dimity bounced onto her bed, grinning. She possessed a generous and happy spirit that allowed her to enjoy a friend’s good fortune.

“I wonder what was in Monique’s letters. The ones she hid in her reticule at breakfast.”

Dimity smiled. “You mean the ones that had been opened and looked at before she got them?”

“You saw them, too? Do you think she’s begging to become someone else’s drone? After all, she and Professor Braithwope have broken off.”

“Does it work like that? I heard vampires come after you,” said Dimity, playing with her bangles.

“Could be negative replies to her ball, I suppose. Did you get a look at Pillover’s letter?” Sophronia closed the wardrobe door on her new dresses and went to the looking glass to prepare for evening lessons. They had Professor Braithwope next, and he was very particular about appearances.

“Yes. Mummy’s still working on aetheric communication, and Daddy’s on mechanical protocols. It’s all rather dull. They’ve been stuck on those subjects for absolutely ever, since before I started school here. Is it relevant?”

Sophronia sat down on her bed in shock. “Relevant? Relevant!” She remembered that it was after visiting Dimity’s house that Monique had first taken possession of the prototype valve. It must have come from Dimity’s parents! They were the ones building them.

“Oh, good, it is? How nice!”

“Dimity, Vieve thinks your parents’ activities are part of Giffard’s upcoming dirigible test. They’ve invented new mechanical protocols to help negotiate the aetherosphere currents. Do you remember the prototype that caused all the fuss at my sister’s ball?”

“Of course I remember. Monique hurled a cheese pie at you.”

“Well, that’s your parents’ device. Someone is using a smaller version of

that device to help Giffard float."

Dimity blinked. "And someone else is trying to get at me to stop them?"

Sophronia nodded. "Pillover, too, don't forget."

"Poor Pill. He's such a little guy, and he's had no training at all." Dimity sounded almost as if she actually liked her brother.

"Did the letter say whom your parents are working for?"

"No, they'd never tell Pillover that. Too adult for a child to understand and whatnot."

"Would either of them work for the vampires?"

"Mummy might," said Dimity. "Daddy wouldn't."

"How about the Picklemen?"

"The reverse."

"And the government?"

Dimity nodded, blushing. "It's embarrassing, and I'm only saying this because we are alone, you understand? But it would depend on the remuneration." She lowered her voice. "We aren't *made*, you know? We're earned."

Sophronia steered the conversation delicately. "Your parents are divided in their political leanings?"

"It's why unions between Bunson's boys and Geraldine's girls are not encouraged. We are allowed to flirt, but that's only to practice. We aren't meant to *marry*. Mummy and Daddy are aberrant. Kind of like Romeo and Juliet. Only with less poison. Well, less poisoning of each other." Dimity was proud of this fact. "The rumor is, Daddy gave up becoming a high-ranked Pickleman for love of Mummy. Very romantic, don't you feel? He might even have achieved Gherkin status."

Sophronia was enthralled. "Are you two the *only* siblings with a boy at one school and a girl at the other?"

Dimity nodded.

"Sadly, this doesn't help us determine which camp is trying to push your parents' hand."

"They could be working for any of the usual suspects, thus alienating any of the others. Hundreds of depraved people could want to kidnap us." Dimity sounded almost philosophical.

"What a mess," said Sophronia. "Why did your parents have to be evil geniuses? Good geniuses are much easier to keep track of."

“All the best geniuses are evil,” replied Dimity confidently. “Oh, goodness, we’re late for lessons. Should we tell a teacher any of this, do you think?”

Sophronia shook her head. “With no proof and no certainty as to who is after you? I’m afraid you simply must be careful, Dimity. And keep an eye on Pillover.”

Dimity sighed. “And here I was so excited to be away at finishing school so I *didn’t* have to spend time with my brother.” She stood and checked in the looking glass to ensure her hair was in place, all her buttons secured, and her lace tuck lying flat.

Sophronia stood as well, wrestling a stray lock of hair back under her cap. “What subject do we have tonight?”

“Oh, Sophronia, didn’t you do Professor Braithwope’s reading assignment?”

“I was out late.”

“Hive and pack dynamics as part of the modern aristocratic system.” Dimity waved a copy of the *Evening Chirrup* at her. “We were to read six articles written over the last twenty years from the gossip column. We’re to present on the treatment of supernaturals as teased out from society papers. It was actually kind of interesting.”

Sophronia took the parchment from her friend. “Did we all have the same six pamphlets to read?”

“Of course.”

“Who knew to collect and keep multiple copies of the same newspapers at various points over two decades?”

“You think these are fake?”

Sophronia raised one eyebrow; she was getting better at the maneuver. “Or Professor Braithwope has hidden quirks.”

“Sometimes I hate the way your mind works.”

They made their way to the lesson. Dimity guided Sophronia by the arm so she could read while they walked. It wasn’t entirely successful, as Sophronia bumped into a wall, a statue of a nymph, and lastly Felix Mersey. She wasn’t entirely certain Dimity hadn’t guided her into the young lordling on purpose. Dimity thought rather too highly of Felix for Sophronia’s good.

“Why, Lord Mersey. How nice to see you this evening.” Dimity pinched Sophronia to make her pay attention.

“Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. Miss Temminnick, are you all right?”

Sophronia, caught by a particular line in one of the older columns, looked up at him. “Oh, no need to apologize, my lord. My fault entirely.”

“I didn’t.”

“Mmm? Ah, well, I’m that clumsy when I read and walk.” She gave him a winning, if absentminded, smile.

“Fascinating transcript?” ventured Felix, slightly alarmed by her pleasant demeanor.

Sophronia thought he looked disturbingly adorable when confused. “Indeed it is. Ever heard of the Westminster vampire hive?”

“Of course, hasn’t everyone? Not exactly my social circle, Miss Temminnick.” The boy’s lip curled slightly.

“Are there many hives in London, do you know, Lord Mersey?”

“My dear Ria, one would be too many.”

“Well, perhaps Professor Braithwope will enlighten me. I take it you won’t be attending our lesson with him?”

“Wouldn’t be permitted, Miss Temminnick.”

“Pity, he’s a very entertaining teacher. If you would excuse us?” Sophronia and Dimity curtsied and made their way into the vampire’s classroom.

“Now what are you about, Sophronia?” hissed Dimity, as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Me?” They took their seats, Sophronia back to reading.

Professor Braithwope entered wearing a velvet smoking jacket, an expertly tied Indian print cravat, and a pathologically unsteady mustache. “Welcome, little bites, welcome. Today we are on to an extremely interesting topic, whot. But first, your thoughts on the reading? Miss Pelouse?” The mustache arrowed in Monique’s direction.

Monique made some offhand comment. Preshea was up next, equally vague.

The mustache drooped. “Ladies, this is vital high-society survival information. Even should your paths take you into a duplicitous union with a conservative family, you must know who sits where in government. Not to mention, who came out of which families into which hives and packs. Did *anyone* read the articles? Miss Temminnick?” He turned the mustache on Sophronia.

Sophronia looked up at the mercurial little man from the wingback love seat she shared with Dimity. “I think the articles are meant to demonstrate the gradual acceptance of vampires into London society via their image as presented in the popular press. The earlier articles emphasize vampires’ monstrous nature, feeding habits, and visiting hours. *Shockingly late*, says one line. And *regrettable slurping*, says another. This article was all about so-and-so being bitten after only three dances. The later columns focus instead on vampire influence on complexion and dress, particularly driven by one Countess Nadasdy of the Westminster Hive. A recluse who never leaves her secret home yet has a significant effect on fashion.”

Professor Braithwope stood silent under this assessment. “Excellent, Miss Temminnick.” His mustache vibrated in approval.

“Do you think you might tell us a little more about the Westminster Hive?” asked Dimity, all innocent and pure. It was the perfect setup, for while she turned wide, honey-brown eyes on the teacher, Sophronia watched Monique. The older girl went still, her expression impassive, which was a giveaway.

Now that the professor has dropped her as drone, I bet Monique wants to trade up to a hive. And she’d want Westminster. It’s clearly the most stylish. Sophronia would lay good money on it.

Monique fished about in her reticule, retrieving a golf ball–sized white powdery object, which she popped covertly into her mouth. She swallowed with the look of a cat forced to eat a carrot.

Professor Braithwope, in animated response to Dimity’s interest, said, “The queen of the Westminster Hive, Countess Nadasdy, is old, mean, and wise. However, her success in making new vampires is no better than any other queen’s. And therein, of course, is the immortal curse. Drones tend to die in the attempt, and *she* has to kill them. This makes most vampire queens a little funny about the head—all that murder.” He looked pointedly at Preshea and then went on to detail the male members of the Westminster Hive—age, holdings, undocumented trade, technological interests, and rank, if any.

This lesson left the six girls with the distinct impression that it was better to play nice with the Westminster Hive. Or avoid crossing them altogether.

They moved on to discussing the reach of the potentate, a rove vampire

but a powerful one, who sat on Queen Victoria's Shadow Council and advised Her Majesty on the running of the Empire.

The girls were beginning to look glassy-eyed. It was a great deal of information to absorb.

"There is one other rove of interest in London, no matter how frivolous he may appear at first. Lord Akeldama is a unique personage of considerable standing with a propensity to dandification—Miss Pelouse? Miss Pelouse, are you unwell?"

Monique had turned, throughout the course of the lecture, a chartreuse color not unlike that of Agatha's dress.

"You are sweating, Miss Pelouse, whot. Young ladies of quality are not supposed to sweat!"

"Oh, Professor, I believe I'm unwell." The blonde got shakily to her feet and then, in a dramatic show, fell forward in a dead faint.

Since they had been instructed many times *always to faint backward*, this was shocking. A forward faint was, to the best of their assessment, a *real* faint! Practically unheard of. Preshea bent over her friend, spreading her own lavender-and-blue skirts out prettily.

Professor Braithwope reeled, discombobulated by such frail mortal activity, and then minced out the door. "Matron! Where's the matron, whot?" Sophronia and Dimity followed him.

At his yell several of the other teachers opened their doors. Sister Mattie's round, friendly face was concerned. "Professor, may I be of assistance?"

"Miss Pelouse is unwell."

Sister Mattie bustled across the hall and into the room.

Professor Shrimpdittle emerged at the far end of the passageway, followed by his boys. "What's happening?"

Sophronia sent Dimity off. "Tell him something is terribly wrong with one of the girls in Professor Braithwope's class. Use a tone that implies the vampire is to blame."

Dimity gave her an odd look but did as requested. She wafted down the hall, smiled sweetly up at the Bunson's teacher, and then whispered to him. She might not be the best at acquiring information, but she was deliciously excellent at disseminating it.

Professor Shrimpdittle's boyishly handsome face became suffused with

red, and he glared at the vampire teacher. Professor Braithwope, flustered by actually having to deal with an illness, remained unaware of the man's ire.

The matron arrived. She and Sister Mattie made a litter out of some parasols and carried the insensate Monique from the room.

By now, word had spread, and most of the lessons were on hiatus. The doors were crowded with curious students, a consequence of their education. A few milled about in the hallway, causing Dimity some distress in returning. Vieve popped up, watching with interest as the fainted girl was carried past. She exchanged a few words with Pillover, who was lurking near Professor Shrimpdittle.

"What did that vampire do to her?" the visiting professor blustered loudly.

"Don't be silly, Algonquin," Professor Lefoux sneered. "The girl fainted. Could hardly be Aloysius's fault!"

"No good can come of having vampires supervising a bevy of nubile young girls," insisted Shrimpdittle.

Pillover said something to Vieve that made her laugh. The girl then trotted back the way she had come. Sophronia realized Pillover must be included in the plot to get Vieve into Bunson's, as he knew her real identity. *How to persuade him?*

The girls returned to class, somber after the sudden illness in their midst.

"Imagine, fainting *forward*!" Preshea whispered, white with shock.

What did Monique eat? Useful to know, thought Sophronia. *I must ask Sister Mattie. Dover's powder, perhaps? And why did Monique want to get out of class so badly she poisoned herself?*

Over supper, Pillover agreed to Vieve's planned infiltration, because it was evil to hide a girl from his professors, and he'd yet to do anything truly evil. "If I'm found out, I'll probably be awarded top marks. So I'm game." His expression remained morosely impassive. Poor Pillover; everything was a struggle. Here he was, forced to be bad, when at heart he was really a rather agreeable fellow. No wonder he behaved like a pustule, as his sister put it.

Felix watched Sophronia's whispered interchange with the younger boy

with an odd expression on his face. She made certain he could not overhear the actual conversation.

Monique looked none the worse for her faint. She must have used the illness as an excuse to read those other secret letters, because she promptly engaged in an odd role reversal.

She took a seat between Dimity and Agatha, not Preshea and one of the boys.

“Dimity, you’re looking quite pretty this evening,” she said awkwardly.

“Um, thank you, Monique?” Dimity was tentative as she frantically searched for the barb within the compliment.

Sophronia and Pillover stopped talking in order to watch this fascinating proceeding.

“Such a nice bracelet you have.” Monique smiled. It looked like it pained her. The bracelet was one of gilt filigree with paste amethyst stones.

Dimity sniffed. “Thank you again. Can I help you with something, Monique?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. It seems that we must make up the numbers. I was hoping you and your lovely brother might honor us with your attendance at my coming-out ball.”

Pillover choked on his mulligatawny soup, snorting a small bit out his nose. Dimity looked at Sophronia, eyes desperate.

Sophronia gave a slight nod and then pointed at herself.

Dimity nodded back. “We will, of course, consider your kind offer, but you know I couldn’t possibly attend without Sophronia. We do *everything* together.”

Monique winced.

“And Sidheag. And Agatha.” The other two girls looked up. Agatha pretended to be pleased. Sidheag attempted not to look disgusted. Sophronia successfully hid a smile.

Monique gritted her teeth. “In that case, you are all invited. I hope you have outfits suitable to the occasion.” Poor Monique; she couldn’t resist saying something nasty.

“I do now,” said Sophronia, but she did not push. This was far too fascinating of a character change. Something in those letters had forced Monique to issue invitations to Dimity and Pillover, which was sinister considering the kidnapping attempts.

Felix turned to Sophronia. “I demand the first dance and the dinner dance, fair Ria.”

Sophronia came over all coy. “Don’t be greedy. You can have the third. I’ll consider the dinner.”

“You’re a hard-hearted woman.”

“I know.”

Dimity mouthed, “Flirting,” at Sophronia, which made her stop self-consciously.

“Oh, look.” Sidheag was the only one not at all interested in this alteration to their London activities. Thus she had not been distracted by the conversation and was pointing at the head table, where the teachers sat.

Professor Shrimpdittle, at one end, had spent the entire meal glaring at Professor Braithwope. The visiting teacher’s sandy hair was mussed, as if he’d been running his hands through it repeatedly. His blue eyes were watery from lack of sleep. His attitude and appearance were unsettling. The students sensed the tension and were embarrassed. Really, he should *try* to hide his animosity. It wasn’t done to allow emotions to impact anyone else’s enjoyment of a meal!

The lady teachers were holding their own, despite a grumpy guest, except Professor Lefoux, who was stoically shoving soup into her mouth in the annoyed manner of any woman when a man is misbehaving.

Sidheag’s attention had been caught by the arrival of Madame Spetuna. The fortune-teller was making her way to the dining table. A place was laid for her, so she had been anticipated, although she had missed the soup course. She was permitted to sit, with only a dirty look from Mademoiselle Geraldine, who thought punctuality more important than anything else, including bathing, brains, and breathing.

Sophronia wished for an opportunity to talk to the fortune-teller alone, to test out her suspicions that Madame Spetuna was an agent. She considered breaking into the record room to see if there were any files on the lady.

Madame Spetuna sat next to Professor Braithwope. The vampire took no food, only sipping a little port. The two engaged in animated conversation, much to the continued annoyance of Shrimpdittle.

Sophronia said, “Professor Shrimpdittle seems quite emotional over the presence of a vampire. I wonder if he is entirely stable. One doesn’t have to

like them, but they are here to stay. One must at least be polite."

This caused all three of the young men at their table to look at her with varying expressions of confusion.

"He's all right, is Shrimpdittle," said Pillover. Sophronia remembered, at that moment, that he was the youngest of the boys on board and had said he was confused as to why he had been permitted on this trip—which was meant to be a reward for boys of high standing. Had Shrimpdittle insisted Pillover be brought along, intending to put the boy at risk? He could be working for the Picklemen. Did that mean the Picklemen were trying to kidnap Dimity and Pillover?

Sophronia nibbled her bottom lip, staring pensively at the head table. She was bent on getting Vieve's agenda enacted regardless of the man's motives. "He seems unhinged. Is he fond of the drink, perhaps? Don't you feel as if his objections against the supernatural are excessive?"

"What are you implying?" demanded Felix.

"Me, *implying*? Nothing at all. Although, it could be that he is trying to hide favor or income."

Monique, of all people, jumped on this idea. "Pretending to hate them, when he really is progressive? Are males of his scientific ilk any good at acting?"

It was a stylish trap, and Sophronia was almost grateful to Monique for staging it, so she didn't have to. Now the boys at their table had to either defend their teacher as faithful to the conservative cause but possibly insane, or allow the ladies to imply that Shrimpdittle was not honest to the moral foundation of their school.

The boys did neither, being trained only in the ways of infernal devices and not inferring derisively. All of them, even Felix, looked confused. Sophronia hoped that the rumor was out there now—was Professor Shrimpdittle to be trusted? Whose politics did he *really* back? Was he going mad?

Sidheag jumped in to help. "You know, the other day when we were grounded and Professor Niall was around, I saw them engaged in conversation."

The three boys only looked more confused.

"Professor Niall," explained Sophronia, "is a *werewolf*."

"Never!" objected Lord Dingleproops. "Not Shrimpdittle!"

Agatha tried as well. “And I saw him being nice to a kitten, once.”

Everyone looked at her, puzzled.

Agatha blushed beet red. “Well,” she practically whispered, “that’s hardly very *evil* genius of him, now is it?”

Dinner conversation evolved away from the topic at that point, but Sophronia was tolerably certain the school would be buzzing by bedtime with questions about Professor Shrimpdittle’s motives.

Her own mind buzzed. She was holding on to too many threads at once and attempting to solve too many puzzles. It wasn’t only Shrimpdittle; there was the information on the throw cushions to consider. Why had that shipment been so important? Was Madame Spetuna involved? Who were the pillows warning about: Picklemen, vampires, or some other element? And how was the Dimity kidnapping attempt connected to this? Did it all come down to the new dirigible technology? And was the guidance valve at the center of the enigma?

The others chattered, leaving Dimity, Sophronia, and Pillover to themselves at the end of the table.

Sophronia looked at Pillover a long moment. “What do you think of this kidnapping attempt?”

Pillover’s dour face brightened. “Spiffing. I could do with a vacation.”

Dimity put it together. “Monique’s sudden change of heart and ball invitation? You think it has something to do with that?”

“Of course I do.”

“Could we turn it down, then?” begged Pillover plaintively.

Dimity whirled on him. “Absolutely not! We should take this as an opportunity to flush out our enemies! Right, Sophronia?”

Sophronia massaged her temples. “This is making my brain hurt.”

“I thought you liked it,” said Pillover.

“In moderation and not while I am also running a character-assassination campaign.”

“Yes, what is this thing with Professor Shrimpdittle? Did he do something particularly awful to you?” Dimity asked.

“Now, Dimity, you know I’m not the kind to seek revenge.”

“Not entirely.”

“What are you girls up to?” demanded Pillover. “I wouldn’t say I *like* old Shrimps, but he’s not the worst of our teachers, that’s the truth.”

Sophronia puffed out her cheeks. “It isn’t personal. He knows too much, and I have an arrangement that requires I remove him from his current position.”

Pillover put it together. “Vieve! She wants to attend Bunson’s, but he knows she’s a *she*.”

Dimity was shocked. “Oh, Sophronia, no. She can’t be allowed. What if she’s found out? The humiliation! Her aunt can’t possibly entertain such a madcap scheme.”

“If Vieve manages to arrange it so that no one knows, then Professor Lefoux has given her permission. I think her aunt is annoyed they don’t allow ladies to be official evil geniuses. You should know how aggravating that is, with your mother.”

Dimity looked like she didn’t want to believe it. “But I thought Professor Lefoux was so proper.”

“She *is* French,” said Pillover, as if that could be used to explain all possible impropriety.

“How’d Vieve get you involved?” Dimity demanded.

Sophronia smiled slyly. “I get her gadgets when she leaves.”

Dimity sighed. “I should tell Lord Felix Mersey that the way to your heart is paved with infiltration apparatus.”

Sophronia pretended horror. “Don’t you dare! I like watching him struggle. He’s so handsome when he’s flustered.”

Pillover was disgusted. “Girls!”

A
Well-Executed Character Assassination

Sophronia felt it would take only one more delicate push to topple Shrimpdittle. Sister Mattie had instructed them in the fine art of skin dyeing for subterfuge only a month earlier. Sophronia concocted a plan based on this information. It would involve breaking into a gentleman's bedchamber, but if the professor was a solid sleeper, it shouldn't be difficult.

Of course, Sophronia had no way of knowing *how* Professor Shrimpdittle slept. Ordinary character assassinations required considerable research on the victim prior to enactment. Sophronia hadn't the time. She could only hope that given his fondness for wine, the man would slumber deeply.

Once she had possession of the obstructor, it was a simple matter to make her way to the teachers' section. Vieve yielded up the device easily, knowing Sophronia was using it for the Cause. Sophronia paused at one juncture, after blasting a maid mechanical, reflecting that she had become quite relaxed about running about after hours. She ought to remember to stay on her guard, for it was when an illegal activity became easy that one was most at risk of exposure.

Professor Shrimpdittle's guest rooms were in the forbidden red-tassel section. Sophronia thought she had chosen an hour late enough for everyone to be asleep. Except Professor Braithwope, of course. She rounded the corner to be confronted by a soldier mechanical, which she shot

into stillness. Then, as she went to creep around it, she found the hallway occupied!

Someone in a long dressing gown and bed cap of matching emerald brocade walked down the hall and entered Professor Braithwope's room. Without knocking, mind you! Impossible to tell whether the wearer was female or male, but it was most certainly not the vampire—too tall. *A pox upon nondescript clothing*, cursed Sophronia—in knickerbockers, corset, and men's shirt. *Is Monique still feeding him? It could be her, I suppose*.

Sophronia was preparing to proceed when, of all people, Sister Mattie emerged from Mademoiselle Geraldine's quarters and hurried down the hallway. Sophronia had to blast the soldier mechanical again, as she caught the telltale whirr of the machine ramping back into action.

She was thinking of aborting—the chances of discovery were too great—but the gaslight from under the various doors went out, except Professor Braithwope's. The quiet murmur of voices from his room indicated he and his guest were settled into conversation. So, with silent footsteps, grateful for the plush hallway carpet, Sophronia crept to the very last room.

Sophronia opened Professor Shrimpdittle's door with her lock pick, automatically checking the jamb for cords, bells, sticky substances, or traps. *Nothing. He really is an innocent*. Closing it behind her, Sophronia's eyes adjusted to the weak light of a white-misted moon. Professor Shrimpdittle snored loudly, in a gratifyingly deep sleep.

Sophronia crept over and removed a little perfume bottle from her cleavage. Inside was a mixture of concentrated walnut dye and beet juice. It didn't last long, but it would hold to the skin for a day or so even under strenuous washing, especially if it were left to sit several hours—while a man was asleep, for example.

Carefully, she touched the small end of the stopper to the teacher's neck, light as could be. Twice. She examined her handiwork. It looked exactly as if it might be the mark left by vampire fangs. She fervently hoped that the man wouldn't move and smear it while it dried. She hurried to the door and let herself out, mission accomplished.

"Well, well, what are *you* doing?"

Sophronia only just managed not to let out a shriek that would have awakened the entire front section of the airship. She whirled to find Madame Spetuna standing in the hallway, arms crossed. She'd lost several

of her scarves and much of her accent. *She looks younger, too*.

At a loss, Sophronia curtsied. “Madame Spetuna, how do you do?”

The purported fortune-teller looked at the door Sophronia had shut. “Professor Shrimpdittle’s quarters, is it? What could you possibly have to do there?”

Sophronia didn’t answer.

“And you had me sew that button in his ear earlier as well. What are you up to, little covert recruit?”

She knows that, does she? “I might just as well ask what you are up to, Madame Spetuna.”

“Touché.”

They stood in the shadows, at an impasse.

“I have learned you are in possession of a mechanimal,” the fortune-teller said at last.

“How?” Knowing she was a covert recruit was one thing, but Sophronia had hoped the teachers knew nothing of Bumbersnoot.

The diminutive lady cocked her head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

Of course, if she was trained here, and she’s as good as I think she is, she would have sources of information beyond the teachers. “What’s it to you?”

“Let us make a bargain. You give me the mechanimal, and I will not reveal your infiltration of the tassel section.” Madame Spetuna gestured with one hand at the dark hallway.

“Why do you need him?”

“Let us say, I could use the status conferred upon owners of mechanimals.”

Sophronia speculated, “It would be a help if one wanted to gain the confidence of, say, flywaymen and Picklemen. They do have a penchant for mechanimals, don’t they?”

Another silence met that.

“You cannot have my mechanimal.”

The fortune-teller’s eyes narrowed. She cocked her head threateningly, like an angry rooster. A red fringed scarf about her neck contributed to the effect, looking like a wattle.

Sophronia added, “But you may *borrow* him for a time. Arrange to return him to me in, say, one week, and we have a deal.”

Madame Spetuna pursed her lips. “One month.”

“Two weeks.”

“Three.”

“Done. And I want to know why you came on board to report in. What was so important you had to leave your post and abandon all those embroidered pillows?”

“My, my, you are a devious little thing, aren’t you?” Madame Spetuna made a decision. “I came to report that the flywaymen are assembling a float gather. This has not occurred in some fifty years. Also, they are allying formally with the Picklemen.”

“Which is why you need Bumbersnoot. This is an opportunity for you to trade up to a more significant position in sky ranking.”

“Bumbersnoot?”

“My mechanimal.”

Madame Spetuna inclined her head.

“Why are they gathering?”

“Giffard’s dirigible. If he can travel the aetherosphere, so could they.”

Sophronia wrinkled her nose. “They aren’t trying to kidnap my friend Dimity, are they?”

Madame Spetuna looked genuinely confused.

Sophronia nodded to herself. Either Madame Spetuna wasn’t high up enough to know, or the Picklemen weren’t revealing this plan to their flywaymen allies, or it wasn’t the Picklemen. *Vampires, then?*

“When can I get the mechanimal?” demanded Madame Spetuna.

“Tomorrow evening, in the boiler room,” said Sophronia.

“Done.”

“How do I know you won’t steal him forever?”

“You don’t.”

They parted, and Sophronia was left feeling both forlorn and triumphant, although her prevailing emotion was one of relief. She was wrung out, like wilted spinach. *I’m losing my touch,* she thought. *I got caught!* Her stomach sloshed. Confidence shaken, she took a long time to make her way back to her quarters.

By the next morning, however, Sophronia was more controlled. During the brief free time before breakfast, she went hunting for Vieve.

The thing about Vieve was that the scamp turned up when she pleased, and no one was entirely certain where she spent the bulk of her time. So when one was looking for Vieve, it could prove difficult to actually find her. Sophronia pestered the hall steward, one of the human staff members, into getting the word out that Vieve was wanted. And after searching for a bit, she gave up.

The younger girl appeared, dimpling excitedly, to escort her to breakfast an hour later. They hung back, despite Monique's teasing, for a quick exchange. Sophronia shook her head quite firmly at Felix when the boy looked as if he would come over and take her arm. She indicated that she already had an escort, and even Lord Mersey was well mannered enough not to interfere. He did, however, look offended.

"Quickly," said Sophronia. "Your Bunson's plan is getting me into heaps of trouble. I've had to promise the loan of Bumbersnoot to a *fortune-teller*."

Vieve gave her best effort at a guilty look.

Sophronia was not fooled—Vieve rarely felt guilty about anything. "Can you kit him out to emit a timed explosive? Set the timer for three weeks in the future, give her incentive to get him back to me quickly?"

"I won't ask for the details."

"Nor should you. Well, can you?"

Vieve scrunched up her nose. "Explosives aren't my strongest suit. It's ridiculously difficult to acquire them when one is only ten. Then again, I could link something under pressure to his own functionality, get the viscosity of the oil down enough to begin a gradual buildup." Her forehead wrinkled. "You'd have to shut him down and clean him out if you got him back early."

"Show me how?"

"Of course."

"The boiler room, this evening?"

Vieve nodded and then skittered off.

At breakfast Professor Shrimpdittle was red-eyed and panicky, with a very high cravat tied about his neck.

Soap was thrilled to see Sophronia that night. “My goodness, miss, I thought you’d forgotten all about us.” His grin practically lit up the boiler room.

Sophronia thought he was looking remarkably fit. Had he got himself new clothing? Well, *newer* clothing. “Never, Soap. Things have simply been busy with this trip, that’s all.”

“And with all them fine visiting gentlemen?” Soap’s tone was overly casual.

“Now, Soap. You know you’ll always be my favorite.”

Soap tugged his own ear self-consciously. “Aw, miss.”

Sophronia unstrung Bumbersnoot from his reticule disguise and put him down on the floor. His tail *tick-tock*ed happily as he nibbled chips of coal and snuffled in the black dust.

“So, miss, what’s the doggerel?”

Sophronia relayed to Soap some of what she was currently scheming—the bits she was tolerably certain wouldn’t offend. She told him of Vieve’s plan to relocate, her own plotting against Shrimpdittle, the fortune-teller spy, and the possible attempted kidnapping of Dimity and Pillover. And how it all might be tied to Giffard’s fancy new dirigible technology and the guidance valve that was once a prototype.

It was like telling an adventure story to a child. Sophronia made the most of it, exaggerating her own actions rather more than was truthful, and detailing the Chaise Longue Attack as if it were some epic battle.

Soap and the small crowd of sooties who joined him were entranced. They gasped in all the right places. When Vieve arrived and scooped up Bumbersnoot, they barely noticed. The younger girl settled herself to tinker with the mechanimal, making a host of adjustments and configurations. Inside his storage compartment, she placed a round spidery thing that looked uncomfortably deadly, and hooked it into the dog’s tiny steam engine with various cables.

By the time Sophronia had finished her tale, Vieve was done with Bumbersnoot. Sensing that story time was over, the sooties dispersed.

Vieve showed Sophronia the adjustments she’d made.

“You detach it here, like so.” She tapped the side of the spider in a pattern of pressed buttons and twisted nobs.

Sophronia memorized it.

“That’s the only shutdown sequence that will incapacitate the explosive. Otherwise, it’s timed to be heat dependent. If you try to remove it early, it will explode. What I’ve done is connected it to Bumbersnoot’s boiler. This will cause a slow buildup. He already has a safety thermometer in his storage stomach to prevent overheating; this will cause him to regurgitate the explosive in exactly twenty-four days, if my calculations are correct. Once the device is disconnected, it will explode in minutes. All this timing is rather delicate and requires that Bumbersnoot run standard practices. If he is walked at high speed too frequently, he’ll emit the explosive sooner.”

“Will there be any kind of warning?” Sophronia asked, patting Bumbersnoot’s head.

“His tail will begin to wag faster and faster. When it’s going as fast as a hummingbird’s wings, he’s about to regurgitate.”

“How do we ensure that he himself gets out of the blast range?” Sophronia was worried for her beloved pet’s safety. “And how do I get him back?”

Vieve shrugged unhelpfully.

“Ah, is that the mechanimal?” Madame Spetuna appeared as if out of nowhere.

Everyone started, including the sooties, who were usually excellent at spotting an intruder in their domain.

“Who are you?” Soap demanded.

“Ah, Soap, this is Madame Spetuna. She is that fortune-teller I told you about.”

“How do you do?” said Soap, intrigued.

Madame Spetuna nodded at him curtly. Clearly, she had no time for sooties.

After exchanging glances with Vieve, Sophronia said, “This is Bumbersnoot. Bumbersnoot, this is Madame Spetuna. You’ll be visiting with her for the next few weeks.”

Bumbersnoot’s ears dropped. He whistled a bit of steam out his undercarriage in query.

“It’s not that you’ve done anything wrong, Bumbersnoot. It’s a covert mission for you.”

Bumbersnoot did not look convinced.

“Come now, you want to be an intelligencer like me, don’t you?”

Sophronia patted the metal dog on his head and then handed him to Madame Spetuna. The fortune-teller began stroking the mechanimal covetously.

Sophronia said, “Vieve here has installed an exploding spider, and only the two of us know how to shut it down. If you try to take it out and keep him, it will explode in your hands. If you don’t get him back to me in under three weeks, he will emit it and explode.” Sophronia did not explain that said explosion would be slightly delayed. She wanted the woman to think that attempting to steal Bumbersnoot would be very hazardous. To provide further incentive, she added, “If you opt to merely drop him overboard, I will arrange for the flywaymen to learn who you really work for. I have broken into the record room before, you know.”

“That was you?” Madame Spetuna looked impressed. “Very nice touch, missy. And, of course, you could be lying to me about any of this, and I’ve no way of knowing.”

Vieve said pertly, “I assure you, she is not lying.”

Soap followed this interchange with a look of skepticism. He was fond of Bumbersnoot. “Are you certain about this, miss?” he asked as Madame Spetuna trotted away, clutching Bumbersnoot under one arm.

Nibbling her lip unhappily, Sophronia watched the intelligencer disappear. “No, I’m not. We have to hope that Madame Spetuna and the flywaymen stick close. If they are after the Giffard test, then they’ll be heading to London, like us.”

Vieve was confident. “It will all work out in the end. Only think, Sophronia, how nice it will be to own all my gadgets.”

Soap pursed his lips. “Is *that* your bargain?”

“The things I do for gadgets,” said Sophronia.

Soap, fond of Vieve’s inventions himself, nodded sagely. “Now, miss, you let me know if you need any help getting that critter back, you hear?”

“Soap, what could you possibly…?”

“Why, miss, you think the flywaymen don’t have sooties on their big ships, too?” He gave her an almost evil smile. “My people are everywhere.”

“Soap, have I told you recently how much I adore you?” Sophronia’s heart lightened, her worries about Bumbersnoot allayed slightly.

Soap looked down at his feet and shuffled them in the coal dust. “Aw, miss, not again.”

Sophronia stood on tiptoe and kissed his dusty cheek. “Thank you. You’re a chum.”

Madame Spetuna departed the ship before breakfast the next morning, Bumbersnoot with her. Sophronia felt his lack keenly. She hadn’t realized how prevalent the mechanimal was in her life—puttering about her feet as she washed in the morning, blundering into the furniture while the girls gossiped, eating discarded gloves while they dressed of an evening. Her shoulder, without the weight of the lace strap from his reticule-disguised form, felt naked. She had only a few days to miss him, however, because they finally arrived in the great city of London.

Around midnight on a fine clear Thursday in mid-March, a lone cloud wafted over west London toward Hyde Park. There it stopped and hovered in a most un-cloud-like manner. It hesitated and then headed purposefully toward the grounds of the Crystal Palace, where the Great Exhibition halls were being torn down. It sank low enough to touch the top of the center post, where once massive buildings had housed engines of industry.

No one observed this odd behavior except two gin-soaked gentlemen. They watched the cloud slowly part, revealing itself to be, in actuality, a massive dirigible.

“Did we visit one of the opium dens this evening?” inquired one gentleman of the other, trying to explain away this hallucination.

“Dens? Hens?” said the second, tripping over a mulberry bush.

The two gentlemen swayed where they stood, leaning against each other, transfixed while the dirigible undertook a series of transformations. Dark figures swarmed up to the squeak decks and then climbed over the casings of the huge balloons, scrambling about with the aid of rope ladders, but looking, to the befuddled watchers, like so many four-legged ants.

Eventually, the ants unrolled a canvas banner that stretched the full length of the central balloon and read BLENHEIM’S BUILDERS & SAFETY INSPECTORS. FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY. The ants then proceeded to rig scaffolding from the ship’s decks down to the ground. After these

adjustments the airship looked quite convincingly as if it were part of the Crystal Palace deconstruction operation.

In Hyde Park the only way to hide something as huge as a floating school was to pretend it was a tradesman's concern, a business that functioned through the use of day laborers. Anyone of note tempted to look must instantly look away in humiliation. After all, persons of consequence did not pay attention to buildings going up or down—they were too *exposed*. Anything to do with construction was highly embarrassing.

When Sophronia awoke the next day and trotted out on deck to investigate, she couldn't read the legend spread above them, but at breakfast they were told what it said.

There were a few cries of outrage from the young ladies. After all, they didn't want to be associated with builders any more than the aristocrats strolling through Hyde Park.

Monique was particularly upset. "We can't be *seen* to be here, on a ship emblazoned with an *advertisement*! It's simply too shocking! What if someone observes us disembarking?"

"Well, you'll have to be careful no one does, won't you? After all, young ladies shouldn't be around building sites regardless of signage. You are, as of this moment, restricted indoors. Is that understood?" Mademoiselle Geraldine was firm on this matter.

They all nodded.

Sophronia entertained herself by imagining what kind of disguise might best facilitate escape. She couldn't, after all, look like a builder. She hadn't the physicality for it.

"I guess if I want to wander around, I'll have to pretend to be a sootie," she muttered. After all, most industries required the use of small wiry boys in some capacity.

Dimity was shocked. "Sophronia, first men's garb and now *lower-class men's garb*? The very idea!"

Sophronia admitted, "It *is* daring. Luckily, I have no reason to leave the ship. Yet."

"You will not be allowed off school grounds regardless, ladies," continued Mademoiselle Geraldine. "It's too dangerous to parade around London without an escort. Those of you who have families in town will make special arrangements. For the rest, this is an educational jaunt, not a

pleasure cruise.”

Preshea was upset. “But the shopping! I have been given an extra allowance in anticipation of this trip!” She emphasized the final *p* so sharply it almost popped the eardrum.

“It will wait, Miss Buss.”

“But Monique’s party!”

“That’s enough, Miss Buss.”

Preshea looked sulky.

Monique was smug. Her parents were in town preparing for the ball. She would be allowed to shop as much as she pleased.

So they lodged in Hyde Park, and their classes continued despite the tempting activities outside the windows. The view included the aristocracy taking the air, hackney cabs rolling by, and the certain knowledge that just out of reach were all the luxuries and privileges afforded by town.

It was maddening, for everyone except Sidheag. Even Agatha, normally reticent, yearned to take in a theatrical performance. “Or perhaps an opera. I do adore the opera.”

Sophronia ruminated over whether the ban was intended to drive them into transgression, or if there was some serious threat to the students that warranted keeping them holed up. The teachers were not revealing any secrets, and with only a few attempted escapes by some of the older girls, the day passed smoothly.

The only odd occurrence was later that night, when instead of having Professor Braithwope for evening lessons, they were put in with the older girls under Professor Lefoux. This was their first experience with Vieve’s aunt as an instructor.

Professor Lefoux was patently brilliant and moved through the topic—industrial sabotage, tea, and supply trains—with such rapidity it left most of the class, regardless of age, utterly confused. Then she began to fire off questions in such a way as to make them all feel stupid. It was a traumatic experience and left them fervently wishing for the nice, easygoing, friendly vampire of their ordinary schedule.

Professor Braithwope was a dedicated teacher, and he didn’t like to change his routine. A monster of habit, the vampire. What, then, could possibly draw him away?

His place was empty at the head table at supper, as was a guest spot set

next to it.

“He has a visitor,” said Sophronia, nibbling at some fried haddock.

“Oh, you think so?” Dimity was much less interested in the goings-on of teachers than Sophronia.

“I do. An important visitor.”

Halfway through the meal, when the main course was to be brought out, Professor Braithwope arrived with a gentleman in tow.

The gentleman was tallish, not overly thin or overly fat. He wore proper dress to the height of style but nothing more elaborate. He had a long face with lines about the eyes that suggested exhaustion, not humor, and the general pallor of an invalid or an accounting clerk. The most remarkable things about him were his hands, which were long and elegant, mothlike in the candlelight. Mademoiselle Geraldine insisted on candlesticks for supper. Gas, she said, was too harsh for food.

The stranger sat next to Professor Braithwope as though it pained him to do so, and took no food, only a little port.

Sidheag, following Sophronia’s gaze, said idly, “So that’s why Captain Niall was so anxious.”

“Captain Niall was anxious?”

“About coming to London. I thought it only that werewolves don’t like town, except the West End. Now I suspect that it has to do with *him*.”

Sophronia examined their visitor, trying to determine what it was about this man that the school’s werewolf would find objectionable. “Why him in particular?”

“Don’t you recognize our dear fanged member of the Shadow Council?”

“Goodness, no, why should I?”

Sidheag had been raised in Scotland but nevertheless enmeshed in supernatural politics. “True, he likes to stay out of the public eye, but that’s him, all right.”

“Him who?”

Sidheag nodded firmly. “Funny, me having information before you.”

Now Sidheag was simply being obstreperous.

“Are you telling me that is the *potentate*?” Sophronia hissed her revelation. Things began to click into place in her brain. Not unlike the workings of the oddgob machine. Could this be the school’s mysterious patron? Not just a vampire, not just the government, but *Queen Victoria’s*

pet vampire?

Sidheag chewed a bit of fricassee of rabbit and new potatoes. “Looks like.”

The potentate glanced up and directly at them, as if sensing they were discussing him, although even with supernatural hearing there was no way he could possibly cut through the suppertime chatter all the way to the back of the room. *Or could he?*

Sophronia raised her water goblet in salute. Sidheag ignored him. As Lady Kingair, she was allied with werewolves. Wolves might shun polite society, but they equaled vampires in status.

Felix, observing this interchange, said from across the table, “Very unpleasantly august company you keep here, for a ladies’ seminary. Now, where’s the pudding course?”

“It doesn’t look like your teacher is too thrilled,” replied Sophronia.

Professor Shrimpdittle was looking bilious. He had a bright paisley scarf tied high about his neck. He was focused on his mutton and spinach with single-minded intent.

Felix said, “In no way are two vampires better than one.”

Especially not if you believe you’ve recently been bitten. “Are you certain it’s not the political power he wields?” Sophronia asked.

“Why, Ria, are you speaking in riddles? That’s sweet. I might almost think you wished to lure me in.” Felix batted long lashes at her.

The meal came to a close, the millet pudding and Norfolk dumplings consumed with gusto, especially by Pillover. Sophronia held back while most of the students crowded out through the door, eager for their brief spate of spare time before night classes began. The teachers let them go, lingering over their sherry or brandy, as nature dictated. In the case of Sister Mattie, nature dictated barley water.

Alone, Sophronia inched her way toward the front of the room. She pretended interest in some leftover nibbles at one of the tables. She watched the teachers out of the corner of her eye.

Professor Braithwope stood to take his leave, and the potentate clapped him on the shoulder in a fair imitation of jocularity. There was no real friendliness to the touch. *I suppose they are nervous; one is inside the other’s territory. This ship, after all, belongs to Professor Braithwope by vampire law. So the potentate is imposing, whether invited or not*.

She heard the potentate say, “For blood, queen, and country, Aloysius. You take a grave risk, my boy, a grave risk. You are to be commended.”

Professor Braithwope replied, mustache under control for once, “Thank you, sir. I shall do my best.” This was said in the tone of a son to his military father on the eve of battle.

Feeling that she was pushing her luck, Sophronia drifted toward the exit, only to find herself accompanied by Professor Braithwope.

“Sir,” she said, politely.

“I don’t like how obsequious they all get when he is around,” said the vampire, as though answering a question she hadn’t asked.

“He is a very important person.”

“More than you will ever know, I hope. Don’t try any of your tricks on him, Miss Temminnick. He won’t put up with them the way I do.”

Sophronia’s mind was whirring. *If the school works for the potentate, does that mean graduates are agents of the Shadow Council?* “For blood, queen, and country, sir?” she said softly.

“So he says, Miss Temminnick. So he says.”

Sophronia had always enjoyed the idea of intelligencer work but been worried about whom she might be an agent for. Queen Victoria and her supernatural advisers seemed safer than the Picklemen or the vampire hives, but were they really any better? *If I want to, will I be permitted to make my own arrangements? Can I choose a patron, or do we automatically go to the highest bidder? And if the latter is the case, how is that a fate better than an arranged marriage?*

Sophronia wasn’t certain what instinct drove her to drop by the classrooms that night—but she did.

She saw the light on in Professor Lefoux’s lab and climbed outside to peek in, listening with her trumpet pressed to the porthole. There was only one person in the room, and he wasn’t talking. Professor Shrimpdittle was bent over the large metal suitlike object that he and Professor Lefoux had tinkered with earlier that week. He was working in intense silence, and though Sophronia watched him for a quarter of an hour, she got no information. She returned to her room, puzzled but with a certain sense of

anticipation. Soon, she felt, all her questions would be answered. They were, after all, in London.

Her bed was lonely and cold without Bumbersnoot’s hot metal body to warm her feet.

High Floating Aboard

When she first saw Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality, Sophronia had been impressed by the size of the airship. But no one would ever make the mistake of calling it pretty. It was a cumbersome thing that seemed to stay up by will rather than ability, like a potbellied pig. One got the impression it didn't really want to float but was doing so out of a sense of polite obligation.

The same could not be said of Giffard's aether-current floater, christened the *Puffy Nimbus Eighteen*. It was a thing of technological beauty. Its bottom half was still barge-shaped, but all sleek and elegant. Its blimp was sleek as well, an elongated almond with no patches from cannon fire and no extraneous ropes or ladders. The balloon was made of silk and oiled to a dark midnight purple. The ship glided in over a jubilant crowd and sank to land at the center of Hyde Park, some distance away from the embarrassingly emblazoned Mademoiselle Geraldine's.

The girls were permitted to visit the assembly area to watch the landing, along with hundreds of others. They were under strict orders to stick together, paired into two long lines. They dressed in their best walking frocks and bonnets, parasols raised against an overcast sky.

"Pretty as a pineapple," pronounced Mademoiselle Geraldine, waving them off with a lace handkerchief. Mademoiselle Geraldine never left the airship if she could avoid it. "An Englishwoman's dirigible is her castle" was one of her favorite sayings.

The girls joined in the cheers of welcome. It was a magical event, for

Giffard had managed the journey in under an hour. He'd come all the way from Paris, mostly inside the aetherosphere, higher up than any manned float-craft had ever been before. "He must have used the crystalline prototype guidance valve," insisted Vieve. "He couldn't have managed those currents any other way." Then she vanished into the crowd.

Henri Giffard pranced down the gangplank of his wondrous machine with all the fanfare of a circus ringmaster. He was dressed in a suit of cream check with a turquoise cravat and boasted a mustache the likes of which Sophronia had never seen before. Had he been awake, Professor Braithwope and his sad excuse for a lip curtain would have trembled in humiliation. Henri Giffard's mustache curled up and out like a corkscrew, waxed to within an inch of its life. It was too theatrical. Sophronia instantly stopped looking at him and looked about the crowd. *He must be intentionally drawing attention away from someone?*

The gathering was what one might expect of a Hyde Park afternoon. There were toffs in fancy carriages and on horseback. Mademoiselle Geraldine's young ladies of quality were companioned by a number of other students from surrounding schools, all allowed to walk out for the momentous occasion. There were groups of boffins from the Royal Society, distinguished by slightly rumpled attire and a predilection for spectacles and oddball gadgetry. There were riffraff as well: some chimney sweeps, the occasional shopgirl, greasers, and other representatives of the rougher orders. Before she had met Soap, Sophronia would have glanced over them, but now she examined all with interest. Intelligencers could be anyone, after all.

She wasn't certain exactly what she was looking for—something out of the ordinary, she supposed. She noted a group of extraordinarily well-turned-out dandies to one side. They were a bit out of place. It was early in the day for that sort to be awake, and they were not the kind of men to be interested in dirigibles. She stared at them for a long moment, but then Giffard hailed the pinks with a whoop, and they whooped back. *Chums from the gambling circuit?* Giffard was rumored to be a bounder. Several of the academics looked like they might be too well dressed; perhaps they were in disguise? Then again, they could be French scholars, over to observe the landing.

The *Puffy Nimbus* was locked down. Giffard gave a speech in broken

English and was welcomed with all due honors by the queen's daylight representatives. That was when Sophronia spotted *them*.

Off to the far side, lurking under a weeping willow, were three men, all dressed to the height of fashion, carrying canes and wearing top hats. Around those hats were bands of green. *Picklemen*. They, like Sophronia, acted aloof from the excitement—watchers. As she looked at them, one spotted her. He tipped his hat with his cane. Sophronia twirled her parasol at him and then turned pointedly to take Felix's arm, smiling up at the startled boy.

"Are you unwell, Ria, my dove?" Sophronia had never taken his arm before.

Let them guess at our relationship, she thought. *Let them wonder. Son of a Pickleman, is he? How much does he know?*

Sophronia said sweetly, "A little overstimulated, Lord Mersey, that is all. It's unseasonably warm, don't you feel?"

Felix patted her hand on his arm in a condescending way. "Well, little one, you hold on there. I'll ensure you get back to the ship safely."

Sophronia couldn't resist. "That's my big, strong man."

Felix's eyes flashed at her suspiciously.

Sophronia only continued to smile, using her lashes to good effect.

Felix couldn't help but smile back. She was, after all, on his arm. Why question such a sought-after eventuality?

They returned to the school. Surprisingly, no one had tried to escape during the outing. The teachers were delighted with such unexpectedly good behavior. Accordingly, the girls were given the afternoon off to primp and prepare for London, whether or not they would get out into it for Monique's ball.

The ship was abuzz with the excitement of those who were invited and the disappointed tears of those who were not. Sophronia and her friends pretended titillation. In Dimity's case it was probably genuine. She fluttered about, suggesting a way Agatha might better do her hair ("Really, *darling*, it's such a pretty red"), reprimanding Sidheag for the plainness of her gown ("Add a *little* lace, please?"), and insisting Sophronia wear more jewelry

(“No, the obstructor does not count”).

“It doesn’t look at all like a bangle. Could we dress it up with jewels or something else sparkly?”

“Not without Vieve’s permission. It isn’t mine *yet*. Dimity, leave it alone! I’m far more concerned with being adequately kitted than fashionable.”

“Oh, Sophronia, don’t say such a horrible thing!” Dimity put her hand to her chest and gasped. One of Lady Linette’s techniques. “As if anything untoward would happen at Monique’s coming-out ball.” Her eyes sparkled at the temerity of her own statement.

Sophronia felt guilty. After all, Dimity and Pillover were headed into certain danger. “Very well, you can sparkle up the hurlie if you must. But not the obstructor.”

Dimity clapped her hands and dove for the device.

Over supper that evening, they were informed that night classes were canceled.

“We will all be leaving the school for several hours. I’m told the airship is required by the government for a very delicate test.” Mademoiselle Geraldine looked as if she had swallowed a slug. “It is too dangerous to risk young lives. All students are to pack their most precious items into one hatbox—one, mind you!—and assemble amidships. You are to remain near the Crystal Palace building site, where you will be permitted to observe the test. You will have a quarter of an hour after supper to pack and assemble for staircase deployment. There *will* be a counting.”

A murmur of confusion went through the crowd at such odd instructions. Sophronia looked at Professor Braithwope for hints as to the nature of this *test*. It must have something to do with the vampires trying to conquer the aether. Professor Braithwope’s expression was impassive. Even his mustache betrayed nothing.

Undaunted, the students did as ordered. Several of the girls found themselves very large hatboxes indeed, and all of them wore their best dresses under their winter cloaks, in case something *did* happen to the ship.

“Why tonight?” whined Monique. “Couldn’t this have waited until *after* my ball?”

“No, dear, it couldn’t,” said Sister Mattie, coming up behind the fretful girl.

“Oh, but Sister Mattie, if something happens, my spare ball gown will be destroyed. Then what will I do?”

“My dear, if we lose the ship, it will be far worse than that.”

Monique wailed in distress.

Sophronia was not impressed. She knew for a fact that Monique had insisted other girls carry her dresses in their hatboxes.

Sophronia inched her way over to the dumpy teacher. “Is there really a chance the ship may go down?”

“My dear girl, it is a *floating* school. There is *always* a chance.” Sister Mattie could be rather fatalistic at times; it was why she was such a good poisoning instructor. Death, felt Sister Mattie, must come to everyone in the end. Sometimes it simply required a little help.

Sophronia glanced around. “Are the other professors not joining us?”

Sister Mattie pointed.

The forms of Professors Braithwope, Shrimpdittle, and Lefoux were making their way upward around the edge of the ship.

“What about the sooties?” wondered Sophronia. “If this test is really that dangerous, shouldn’t they be allowed off as well?”

“Oh, they don’t count,” said Sister Mattie airily. “Besides, they are needed to run the boilers. Every engineer is on duty right now, too. It’ll take all the muscle we have to get high enough.”

At that, Sophronia understood exactly what was going on. Everything fell into place—needing a teacher, the school having to travel to London, the vampires’ interest in aether technology. “Giffard is running another aether test tonight, and he needs our school to shadow him because Professor Braithwope is involved. His tether can’t be stretched that high, right?”

“Now, dear, you shouldn’t concern yourself.” Sister Mattie dismissed her with forced casualness and moved away.

Vieve appeared at Sophronia’s elbow, dark hair free of the chronic cap but dimples firmly in place. “Did you notice? They are taking the invention from the lab with them.” Professor Shrimpdittle was carrying the metal suitlike contraption. “And you know what my aunt did? She installed one of the guidance valves inside it! Let’s hope she is better than I am at getting it to turn off correctly.” With that, she disappeared again.

Sophronia moved back to Dimity, Agatha, and Sidheag. “I do wish they

would do the counting soon."

"Why?" Agatha was instantly suspicious.

"Because she wants to stay on board," explained Dimity.

Sidheag was having none of it. "What if they do another count when we are on the ground?"

"I have to chance it. I can't leave the sooties to go up alone. It isn't fair."

"Very noble, Sophronia," applauded Dimity. "I didn't know you had an altruistic bone in your body. Charity is so ladylike."

Sidheag snorted. "Nonsense. She wants to see what's really happening."

Sophronia grinned. "Can't it be both?" She looked with concern at Dimity and Pillover. "You two, please stick tight to Captain Niall? Just in case there are any further kidnapping attempts. The one contingent I can guarantee *isn't* after you is the werewolves. If you stay near the captain, he'll protect you as he would any student."

The Plumleigh-Teignmotts looked as if they would like to object.

"Please, Dimity. *Please?*" Sophronia was more earnest than Dimity had ever seen her.

Dimity nodded, her round face doll-like in its seriousness.

Sophronia turned to Sidheag. "Keep an eye on them, too?"

Sidheag nodded. "Kidnapping?"

"I'll explain later."

Sidheag nodded again. Sophronia blessed Lady Kingair's military upbringing. The girl knew how to follow orders.

"Oh, and Dimity, as you exit, could I have a little diversion?"

Dimity pursed her lips. "Of course. What kind—"

Mademoiselle Geraldine clapped her hands, and all the girls turned to face her expectantly. "Line up by year for the counting. Debuts this side, midranks there and there, oldest girls that side, boys at the back."

There was shuffling while they did as they were told. Felix took it as an opportunity to brush close to Sophronia.

"What's going on, do you think?" he asked.

"You mean you don't know?"

"No, why should I?"

"Your people are involved."

"What do you mean, my people?"

Sophronia gestured below, where a great number of benches were being

put out on the green near the skeleton of the Crystal Palace. This was nothing like Giffard's landing earlier that day. This was a private nighttime affair, and the constabulary were present to ensure it stayed private. These were not any old crushers, either. They wore the silver and wooden weaponry of men who specialized in the supernatural. Not that there would be much activity in Hyde Park so early at night. After supper was a time used to dress. Things weren't actually supposed to *happen* at nine o'clock in the evening. It was a most unfashionable hour to run a test, even covertly. No wonder Mademoiselle Geraldine was disgruntled.

Under the moon's bright light, Felix could see what Sophronia meant by her slur. His *people* were indeed seated below. A goodly number of gentlemen wore top hats with green satin bands about the crown. There were others as well—a group of well-dressed dandies, some scruffy types who could only belong to a nearby werewolf pack, and two pale, debonair gentlemen who must be vampires. The potentate sat with them.

Sophronia noted that the sky was becoming overcast. Not with clouds but with airships. A small armada approached and hovered at a distance. There were little airdinghies with four small balloons and sails up high in the middle—flywaymen. There were larger, proper dirigibles, a matched set with dark-colored balloons—sky pirates or private-airs. *No doubt Madame Spetuna and Bumbersnoot are up there somewhere, watching*.

Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy sank down as low as possible, proving that the scaffolding all around it was quite fake. A counting was conducted, and the staircase was cranked down. As they began shambling toward it, Sophronia drifted to one side, her eyes on the professors. Dimity gave a shriek and a wobble, veering toward the side banister of the stairway. She lurched, almost tumbling down several stories to the ground below. Agatha peeped in fear and pretended a faint backward. Sidheag made a lunge after Dimity and nearly went over the edge herself. They were doing beautifully.

Everyone burbled in perturbation. The crowd boiled upward as ladies rose on tiptoe to see what was happening. Teachers and other staff pressed forward to ascertain the cause of the commotion. Lady Linette, trained as she was, sensed the manufactured nature of the distraction and surveyed the crowd, but with over three dozen on the midship deck, it was easy for Sophronia to wait until her teacher's gaze passed her over.

The moment Lady Linette looked elsewhere, Sophronia crouched. The fashion for large hats, even at night, afforded her some protection from view. Removing her own bonnet, she made a break for the ladder that led to the upper decks. She'd be exposed if she actually took those stairs, but she could hide behind them until everyone had disembarked.

Sophronia waited patiently until blasts of steam and the sound of cranking indicated the staircase was being pulled back up. The ship lurched upward. It was safe to emerge.

Professor Braithwope was visible on the upper forward squeak deck far above. He was climbing into the contraption Professors Lefoux and Shrimpdittle had built. It fit him like those suits designed for undersea exploration. *What are they called? Diving suits*. Once it was fully in place, he looked a little like an oversized mechanical, only more liquid in his movements.

Sophronia made her way around to the far side of the ship, out of view from the watchers below. But not before she saw Sidheag sit next to Captain Niall, along with Dimity and Pillover.

Giffard's aether-current floater, the *Puffy Nimbus Eighteen*, swooped into sight, undulating in their direction. Sophronia had once manned an airdinghy, so she knew enough to admire Giffard's skill. Once the other airship was level with Mademoiselle Geraldine's, the school extended a long gangplank to it, and Professor Braithwope ran across with a tightrope walker's skill. The gangplank was drawn back and the two ships began to rise ponderously, keeping pace with each other. Sophronia had intended to check up on the sooties, but she was hypnotized by the action above her, so she stayed hanging where she was. Professor Braithwope and Mr. Giffard exchanged pleasantries, and then Mr. Giffard went back to work steering his small vessel. The two ships rose together, so high the people below became little specks. Then so did the trees of the park. Finally, London herself was nothing but a blob of twinkling lights. They were above the clouds at last, higher than Sophronia had ever floated. The air was glacial and the winds howled by; the propeller pushed hard against the breezes upon which the school normally drifted peaceably.

Sophronia wondered if there would be a defining shift when they hit the aetherosphere. She knew that it must be close, that invisible onion skin, the thing that protected them all from the void beyond. She couldn't believe

they intended to take Mademoiselle Geraldine's up *that* high. Giffard's aether-current floater was built for the changeable humors of the upper sphere, but Geraldine's was not.

She turned her attention to Professor Braithwope. The vampire stood stiff and straight, leaning back against the railing of the *Puffy Nimbus*'s one squeak deck and looking up. Sophronia could hardly fathom that he intended to enter the aetherosphere. Very little was known about it, except that it was breathable but dense, not like normal air, and dangerous. Only humans had ever been inside it, and only very few of them. But no other vampire could float up even a short distance; Professor Braithwope was the exception, by virtue of his inhabiting their school. So the school had to go up with him as far as it could, keeping his tether as short as possible.

They intended all along to send the vampire, suited in his protective gear, into the aetherosphere. He will be the first supernatural creature to enter aether. They want to know—vampires, werewolves, government, Picklemen. They all want to know: what happens to a supernatural creature in the aetherosphere? They built him a suit as a nod to safety, but they really have no idea what will occur up there.

Professor Braithwope was undergoing a very dangerous test indeed. *For queen and country*, the potentate had said. *For science*, Sophronia thought.

Mademoiselle Geraldine's stopped rising and held steady, the propeller fighting to keep the school in place. They had gone up as high as possible. *Directly above us*, thought Sophronia, *must be the aetherosphere*. It boggled her mind. She looked but couldn't see anything apart from very bright stars. The aetherosphere was invisible from below, and opaque from within, or so she'd heard.

Giffard gave some kind of signal and the *Puffy Nimbus* bobbed up, leaving Mademoiselle Geraldine's behind.

At first everything seemed fine. Then Professor Braithwope began to gyrate around in his mechanical suit, waving his hands about his face as if fending off a swarm of attacking wasps. *The mating dance of a mechanical* was Sophronia's hysterical thought.

Giffard seemed to be occupied doing battle with his navigation helm. Sophronia thought she heard Professor Braithwope scream. Then she saw him jerk wildly backward, come up against the railing, and flip right over it. At the time, and for years after, she was never certain if he fell accidentally

or jumped in order to get relief from invisible tormentors.

Professor Braithwope, encased in his Lefoux-made suit, was tumbling down through the air. His body was limp and there was no sound coming from him anymore.

He should be screaming, thought Sophronia inanely. *I would be screaming*.

She watched, transfixed, as the vampire's body spiraled down into the clouds and out of sight.

Then she moved. He was supposed to have had a guidance valve in that suit of his. Presumably connected to their ship's boiler room, so they could follow him right away if anything happened. But he either hadn't used it or it hadn't worked, because Mademoiselle Geraldine's still held steady.

Sophronia had never moved so fast about the hull, hurling and jumping from balcony to balcony in a frenzy, working her way down until she could climb in the hatch to the boiler room.

Engineering was a swarm of activity, every sootie awake and at work. There were greasers, firemen, and engineers everywhere monitoring the flurry. It couldn't have been easy. All the boilers were burning, licks of flame coming from the fuel boxes. Steam that didn't make its way out through the pipes filled the room, clouding the upper portions of the cavernous space and making it seem more intimate. It was incredibly hot.

Sophronia's only thought was to find Soap. Fortunately, he found her.

"What ho, miss?"

Sophronia babbled, forgetting her manners and grabbing his arms in an excess of emotion. "Soap! The school has to go down with him! His tether will snap!" she yelled helplessly into the loud bustle of the boiler room. "Go down now! Take us down! Please!"

Soap put gentle hands on her clutching arms. "I don't know what you're on about, miss, but orders have to come from the pilot's bubble."

Sophronia panicked. She remembered only Professor Braithwope's face when she asked him about tether limits. How terrified he had been. They needed to follow him as quickly and as closely as possible.

"Soap, who is in charge of the boiler room?"

Soap looked at her, mouth open. "*What*, miss?"

"Take me to him, please? Now."

Soap led her through the craziness at a run. Sophronia dogged him in her

full dress and hat, looking as if she were about to go for a stroll in Hyde Park. Her skirts were long enough to lift up the soot dust in her wake, like steam from a machine.

They ended up at the base of a tall platform that rose up to one side of the room, allowing the man standing on its top to overlook the entirety of the activity therein.

“You stay here, Soap. No sense in us both getting into trouble.”

“Are you sure, miss?”

“Yes,” said Sophronia. *No*, thought Sophronia.

Soap’s face puckered in concern, but Sophronia turned her changeable green eyes on him and said, “Please.”

So he let her climb up to the dais alone.

The man who stood on the top was dirty with coal dust and wore simple clothing—jodhpurs, boots, shirt, and vest. He had facial topiary sprouting off his chin and down his neck like a mountain goat. The beard was red, as was the man’s cruel face.

“Who are you, missy?” he barked.

Sophronia quailed a moment—he was very fierce—and then she remembered Professor Braithwope’s well-tended, if confused, facial hair and found her courage. *I must send a beard to rescue a mustache!* “Sir, it’s Professor Braithwope. He fell. I saw him. We must track him down or he could be permanently damaged. Please, we have to follow quickly.”

“That’s not possible, little miss. The lever hasn’t dropped. And this is no place for a young lady. Get along with you.”

“Please, listen! We must go down. We must!” This was one of those times Sophronia wished she had blackmail material. Why oh why were those lessons only for older students?

“If we were to go down, that newfangled gadget would have told us.” The man pointed to a small cradle, in which sat a guidance valve. It was partly encased in mechanisms that attached to a lever. Sophronia remembered what she’d learned about the first prototype—that it required two to communicate. This was the second, and Professor Braithwope’s suit housed the first. She remembered Vieve and her troubles convincing the sputter-skates to turn off using her guidance valve. It hadn’t worked properly because she’d needed a second valve. This, then, was supposed to have been the vampire’s safety net. Professor Braithwope, or his suit,

should have alerted engineering when something went wrong. That lever should have dropped. But it hadn't, and the professor was falling.

Sophronia might have argued with the man indefinitely, but there came a screeching, airy, puff noise, and a long metal tube, which ended above the platform, spat out a pelletlike object that nearly hit the man on the head.

He grabbed it out of the air and cracked it open on his knee; it split like an egg. Inside was a message, which he read, and then, giving Sophronia a suspicious look, he reached for a massive bullhorn. The brass horn was almost as tall as he, and all over covered in keys and levers. Raising it to his lips and adjusting the controls to his liking, the man yelled out over the chamber. "All hands, pull back, we're going down at speed. Propeller tilt to steady a rapid descent. Greasers Six and Fourteen, take your sooties up top. We're collapsing the midship balloon."

A collective gasp met that statement.

So I managed to climb the ship and get him the message here before the pilot's bubble did. No wonder they want working guidance valves. No wonder everyone is so desperate to get their hands on these things. Everything about air travel could be faster—for everyone, not just those who float inside the aetherosphere.

Into the resulting comparative silence—the machinery still clanged and the boilers still flamed despite the fact that all human movement had stilled—a small voice said, "Not *all the way*?" in a shocked tone.

The red-faced man said into the bullhorn, "Yes. *All the way*. The rest of you, perform your cool-down tasks and then brace for a rough descent. We aren't landing, mind you, but we are going down fast!"

The chamber sprang into action. It was as though everything were in reverse. Sooties who had been running one way began running the other. Stokers stopped stoking. A few even threw water on the burning fuel, the resulting steam adding to the congestion of the room.

The angry man looked at Sophronia. "You, get out of here! Find yourself a place to brace. This is no lark, you realize? And what's your name?"

"Monique de Pelouse," said Sophronia, without missing a beat.

"I wager it is. Now off with ya. Get!"

Sophronia got.

A truly harrowing few seconds followed. The ship sank so fast Sophronia could feel it in her belly. It was a wobbly sensation, especially

when one was accustomed to not feeling anything at all on the floating school. She holed up in her favorite meeting spot behind a—now much diminished—pile of coal, near the floor hatch. Eventually, Soap joined her there. Together they watched the ground approach through the hatch.

“What did you do, miss?” asked Soap as London came into view.

“It wasn’t me. I tried, but he only took instructions when some tube spat at him.”

They could see Hyde Park at the city center and Regent’s Park to the north.

“Pilot’s orders. Must have agreed with you. But deflating a balloon? It’s not done, not ever. The expense alone!”

They began to see streets and houses distinctly.

“Are we going to crash?” wondered Sophronia, her heart fluttering.

Soap inched one long arm about her waist with the excuse that she might need the support. Sophronia was somewhat reassured.

The bones of the Crystal Palace and the now empty benches came into view. Everyone was crowded around what could only be the fallen body of Professor Braithwope.

“Man the pull back, swell up inflation,” came a yell over the bullhorn.

“Erp, that’s me!” Soap dashed back to work.

Sophronia felt bereft.

Someone in the crowd below looked up, pointed, and screamed. It must be a truly terrifying thing to see, the massive school hurtling down toward them.

Then Sophronia felt a mighty jolt. They stopped falling and hovered, almost exactly as high above the ground as they had been before the whole thing started.

The sooties cheered.

Several of the young ladies in the crowd below fainted. Each faint was, properly, backward and caught by one of the many gentlemen in attendance.

Sophronia let down the rope ladder attached to one side of the hatch and climbed to the ground as quickly as she could.

Balls and Chains

No one—at least no one who had anything to say about it at the time—noticed Sophronia climbing down. She made her way through the crowd, ending up between Dimity and Captain Niall. She noted with relief that Pillover was still there and nodded gratefully at Sidheag, who had forced them into continued proximity with the werewolf.

Sidheag smiled back. Genuine pleasure lit up her long, masculine face.

Professor Braithwope's body was bent in a most unusual way. Someone had removed the helmet of the aether-suit, and the vampire's face was gray-green in color. His mustache was deflated and floppy.

Monique de Pelouse was bent over the vampire, her face a study in tragedy. Sophronia wondered if it was a calculated expression, intentionally revealing her intimacy with the vampire to the other vampires present. Was she saying, in her best Monique way: I'm in the market for a new patron? She might as well have taken out a sign that stretched across Mademoiselle Geraldine's midship balloon.

Lady Linette was barking orders. "Get those stairs down. Quickly! We must get him onto school grounds immediately!" Sister Mattie was pulling and rearranging Professor Braithwope's limbs, attempting to get them back into alignment. Professor Lefoux's normal attitude of strict severity was in place, but her hands shook as she attempted to remove the aether-suit.

Then Professor Braithwope's eyes snapped open.

The crowd gasped in titillated horror.

The vampire's skin was drawn back flush against his skull as he opened

his mouth in a silent scream, showing yellow gums and the full length of his fangs. They were a stark contrast to his fragility, all that wicked strength in such a small, sickly man.

"Oh my," whispered Dimity, "how monstrous!"

Sophronia inched closer to the vampire, trying to listen to the quiet conversation between his female attendants.

"Monique!" said Professor Lefoux. "You'll have to do your duty."

Monique, composed and regal, nodded and with a single lissome movement swirled off her cape. Without hesitation she pressed one of her wrists to the vampire's gaping mouth.

He bit down, hard. Blood splattered Monique's white skin.

The surrounding watchers inhaled as one.

Dimity, as was her custom, fainted.

Monique gave a delicate shudder but no other reaction.

Well, thought Sophronia, *that secret is definitely out. It's a good thing she's having her coming-out ball and leaving the school, or there would be questions from her parents after this*.

It could almost be thought romantic, if it hadn't been so gruesome. A tiny teardrop of blood leaked out the corner of the vampire's mouth; his eyes remained wide and staring. Behind him, the great staircase of the school cranked downward, white puffs of steam escaping into the night. The midship balloon was being inflated and the fake scaffolding put back into place.

"Pull her away," barked Professor Lefoux, without looking up from the suit. "That's enough blood for one girl to give."

Lady Linette yanked Monique's wrist off the vampire's fangs and pushed her back.

Monique swayed.

The crowd murmured in concern, but no one stepped forward to help. Monique's cronies and sycophants looked away guiltily. Even Preshea did not want to touch her.

Then, out of the crowd, came one of the other vampires. He was an impossibly handsome man, older than he looked, of course, but one to set any young lady's heart fluttering. Even knowing he was a vampire. For some, *especially* knowing he was a vampire. He took hold of Monique gently, his hands soft and supportive on her shoulders.

“There, there, pretty little nibble.”

Monique looked up at him from dazed blue eyes. “Oh, thank you, kind sir.”

Sophronia tried to memorize the man’s face. He might be important.

“More blood,” barked Sister Mattie. “He will succumb otherwise. And he needs it now.” She was looking at Professor Lefoux.

“Look at this.” Vieve’s aunt was distracted, gesturing to some section of the suit. “It’s been tampered with! And the transmitter valve, it failed.”

“Never mind that now, Beatrice. He needs you.”

Professor Lefoux finally looked up. “What? Now?”

“Yes, now!”

“Oh, very well.” Professor Lefoux rolled up one sleeve of her serviceable gown and placed her wrist to the vampire’s still dripping fangs with an air of disregard.

The girls of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s, the ones still sensate, sent up a gasp. The implication was unavoidable. Professor Lefoux was *also* a drone to Professor Braithwope!

Everyone’s secrets are coming to light tonight, thought Sophronia, wondering how she had missed this little facet of interteacher dynamics. *I should have been a better observer. That must have been Professor Lefoux in the green robe the other night*.

Feeling self-conscious but knowing now was the right time to do it, Sophronia stepped forward and whispered in Professor Lefoux’s ear.

“Professor, I hesitate to say such a thing, but I believe I saw Professor Shrimpdittle going into your lab alone last night. And he certainly hates vampires.”

Professor Lefoux’s sharp eyes turned toward her. “What are you about, Miss Temminnick?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, Professor. Only letting you know, if there’s sabotage…” She trailed off.

Professor Lefoux, as if she could not help herself, glanced over the crowd, focusing on Professor Shrimpdittle. The boys’ teacher stood at the very back, looking as though he might run. His milk-fed face was equal parts shock and horror.

Sophronia stepped back into the throng.

Sidheag, supporting the fainted Dimity under one arm, asked gruffly,

“What’s going on *now*?”

“Wait and watch.”

Eventually, Professor Braithwope stopped feeding. He still looked awful, eyes unfocused, and remained silent. He was lifted up by a group of dandies and carried on board.

Mademoiselle Geraldine pressed a large handkerchief to her trembling lips and trailed after, whispering brokenly, “But a man of such *qualit-tay* !” A few of the young ladies, overcome with sentiment, followed.

Professor Lefoux, without bothering to pretend weakness, tied Sister Mattie’s handkerchief about her own wrist, rolled down her sleeve, and bent once more to examine the aether-suit. Eventually, she looked up.

“It has been tampered with; the guidance valve is not set properly. Meticulous sabotage, of the kind only possible from someone who knew how the suit worked. There is only one other person who could have done such a thing.”

“Well,” said Vieve, appearing at Sophronia’s elbow, “that’s not entirely true.”

“Vieve, you didn’t!”

“No, I didn’t, but I should like at least *you* to know that I *could*.”

Sophronia said, “Impossible child, better keep *that* to yourself.”

Professor Lefoux continued, “I am saddened to have to do this publicly, but Lord Ambrose, if you might be so kind as to seize Professor Shrimpdittle?”

The handsome vampire who had been consoling Monique looked at Professor Lefoux and then, with a curt nod, flitted supernaturally fast to the edge of the crowd, scooping up Professor Shrimpdittle before the man could even start to run.

“I object!” yelled the teacher, his eyes wild.

Sophronia felt suddenly unwell. She didn’t want to witness this, not after she had driven him to do it. *Because of me*, she thought, *the suit was sabotaged. Because of me, Professor Braithwope could be permanently damaged. And now, because of me, this man will be punished for it*. She wanted to be sick. She wanted to blame Vieve and her devilish bargain. Instead, she schooled her features, swallowed down the bile, and stood witness to her own actions.

“We protest,” said one of the Picklemen in an autocratic tone. “Professor

Shrimpdittle is a respected member of the Royal Society, not to mention a learned teacher."

"He is also a noted vampire hater," said Lord Ambrose, casually picking at his fang with a cravat pin while still holding Professor Shrimpdittle with his other hand.

The crowd separated. The vampires and their drones ranged against the Picklemen. The few ladies present, the remaining girls from the school, and Captain Niall held neutral territory between the two parties.

The potentate stepped forward, flanked on either side by two very large, scruffy men. Captain Niall did a strange thing at the sight. He bowed, tilting his head and baring the back of his neck in a gesture of profound submission. Sidheag did the same. The scruffy men both nodded, accepting this odd behavior as their due. Their top hats, while fine specimens to the height of fashion, were tied beneath their chins, the black velvet ribbon stark against the white of evening cravats.

"Who are they?" Sophronia asked.

"The one with the mustache on the left is the dewan, the queen's own werewolf and the potentate's counterpart. The other one is Lord Vulkasin Woolsey," explained Sidheag out of the corner of her mouth.

"Is there anything you don't know about werewolves?" Sophronia demanded.

"Nope. You try living with them for a few years running. They're not exactly subtle."

"Shush," said Captain Niall, coming out of his bow.

The dewan said, his voice gravelly, "You have an accusation to make, Professor Lefoux?"

Professor Lefoux looked up from the aether-suit. "I do."

Professor Shrimpdittle struggled. "He bit me!"

One of the Picklemen instructed, "Say no more, Algonquin!"

Shrimpdittle was wild-eyed in desperation. Lord Ambrose lifted him as if he weighed no more than a lady's muff, and carried him forward, depositing him into the even stronger embrace of Lord Woolsey. Vulkasin looked mean, even for a werewolf. His mouth was a hard line and there were no smile wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

"I had to protect myself!" cried Professor Shrimpdittle, wiggling futilely in the werewolf's grip. "I had fang marks on my neck!"

“Poppycock,” said the potentate. “Professor Braithwope would never bite without invitation.”

“Shame on you,” said Lord Ambrose, “to cast aspersions on a vampire who has recently risked so much for his country!”

“Hear, hear!” cried the vampires in the crowd.

“Lies!” screamed Shrimpdittle, spittle spraying from his mouth. “All lies!”

One of the other Picklemen shook his head. “Stop now, Shrimpdittle.”

But the man was beyond reason. “I had to stop him! I had to.”

Lord Woolsey had heard enough. His lip curled. “I arrest this man in the name of the queen, for sabotage and attempted murder. You will let me know, Captain Niall, how the fallen vampire fares. Whether I must change the charge to murder?” He clearly did not care either way. Vampires and werewolves might not like each other, but when it came to running the country and preserving the good name of supernaturals, they always found common ground.

Captain Niall saluted the other werewolf. “Sir!”

Sophronia closed her eyes involuntarily. Vulkasin was one of the nastiest-looking supernatural creatures she’d ever seen. *What have I done, delivering poor Shrimpdittle into his clutches?*

“Any challenge?” The dewan looked over at the crowd of Picklemen.

They murmured briefly among themselves.

“Bad form,” Sophronia heard one of them say, “confessing like that. Very bad form.”

Finally, the oldest of the lot tilted his hat politely at three of the most powerful supernaturals in England and said, “We will, of course, provide legal counsel, but we cannot forestall the arrest. It is justified. He will be immediately removed from all teaching responsibilities.”

With that, Lord Woolsey and the dewan walked away. Lord Woolsey carried the frantic Professor Shrimpdittle under one arm like a rolled umbrella.

Sophronia glanced at Felix’s face. The boy was shocked, but he did not look over at her, so he must not suspect her involvement.

Pillover, on the other hand, was glaring at her. “He really was one of the better teachers. It isn’t fair! Take it back, Sophronia!” With that, he grabbed his sister, still in a deep faint, and stormed off to the airship—half carrying,

half dragging Dimity.

Sophronia, still worried about their safety, gave Sidheag a lips-compressed head tilt of encouragement.

“What am I,” grumbled the Lady of Kingair, “the nanny?” But she trotted after the Plumleigh-Teignmotts. She might be a grumpy old thing, but she liked Dimity and she trusted Sophronia’s instincts.

Vieve, on the other hand, glanced up at Sophronia with shining eyes and said very softly, “All this for me? You’re too kind.”

“Oh, yes,” replied Sophronia, riddled with guilt. “I ruined one man and by doing so nearly killed another, all so you could go to school. You had better earn the sacrifice.”

“I shall be brilliant,” said Vieve with confidence. “What happened up there?”

“The blasted guidance valve failed. Or the professor was too crazed to remember to trigger it. It was awful. It was as if he went mad. And when he fell, it took our ship forever to respond.”

Vieve tried a smile. “Don’t worry, both the professors will be fine.” She had all the optimism of a child.

Captain Niall, supernatural hearing and all, stared down at Sophronia and Professor Lefoux’s niece with a suspicious look. Apparently unable to fathom why or how Sophronia might have orchestrated the visiting teacher’s mad act, he simply sighed deeply and said, “Why did I get involved with this kind of finishing school? Espionage is not for werewolves.”

Vieve said pertly, “Boredom, sir?”

Captain Niall cuffed her ear gently and wandered off.

Lady Linette began marshaling the girls back on board. “Some of you,” she reminded them, “have a ball to dress for!” That got them moving with much greater rapidity than anything else.

Sophronia, truth to tell, was having an internal crisis. She hadn’t meant to drive Shrimpdittle to such lengths, but it was her fault. *She* had convinced the poor man that Professor Braithwope had bitten him. *She* had driven him to sabotage the guidance valve in the aether-suit. If Professor Braithwope died, she was to blame. *Are character assassinations always this awful?* she wondered. *Will I have to learn to live with such consequences all the time? Am I really cut out to be an intelligencer, if this*

is part of it?

She responded like a mechanical to Lady Linette's instructions.

On board the ship, everything was forgotten in the excitement of a ball. Girls rushed between chambers, rendering gown judgments and borrowing accessories. Only Sophronia stayed worried about Professor Braithwope's condition.

Vieve showed up in their parlor, damning and approving the state of hair fobs and follies with great authority for a girl who only wore boys' clothing.

"No, Dimity, you should leave yours as loose as possible but still up in a ladylike manner. It's a real scorcher, your hair. Best display it to maximum efficiency. Agatha, try curls. No, bigger curls. Bigger!"

Monique and Preshea emerged from their room, and everyone stopped and gasped appreciatively. The two girls looked truly charming. Monique was all tall blonde elegance, with Preshea the velvet night to her moon. *Blast it*, thought Sophronia, *they look so good I'm coming over poetic. How humiliating*.

"Gold brocade?" said Vieve's little voice. "A bold choice for the first gown of the Season."

That broke the spell, because Monique turned sharply, squeaking due to the tight bodice of that gorgeous gold gown, and threw her fan at the young girl.

Vieve laughed, batting it away. "Oh, very ladylike. Aren't you all grown up?"

Sophronia was wearing her new sage dress with the evening bodice and the fancy overskirt. Her hair was up, though not very done, and her jewelry was minimal—paste pearls borrowed from Dimity. She looked lovely in her simplicity, or so Dimity insisted. "Like a fresh green sunflower sprout."

"I look like a sprout?" Sophronia pretended offense and tried to join in the excitement. But she felt distant and alone. She kept seeing Professor Braithwope's blank eyes and broken form.

Vieve came to stand next to her. "Aren't they a sight?"

"Who?" Sophronia was a tad short with her friend.

“All of them. You’d think this ball the most exciting thing to ever happen.”

“When a few short moments ago a vampire fell from the sky?”

Vieve turned, tilted her cap back, and looked out from under it at Sophronia. “You may have arranged matters, but the actions of others are not your fault. You know that, yes?”

“How is he, Vieve?”

“We should talk in there.” Vieve gestured casually to Sophronia and Dimity’s room.

As soon as the door was closed, she said, “I overheard my aunt and Sister Mattie chatting with the potentate and Mr. Giffard. Despite Shrimpdittle’s tampering, they don’t think that was the cause of Prof B.’s condition. Giffard said the vampire went crazy the moment they entered the aetherosphere. One second he was standing there in his suit, the next he was gyrating around the deck as though on fire. It was as if he had an adverse reaction to the aether itself. Even if the guidance valve had been working, he was too insane to activate it. Professor Shrimpdittle’s sabotage was irrelevant. And now Professor Braithwope is a babbling madman, and they aren’t sure if it’s the result of aetherosphere exposure, the fall, or a snapped tether.”

“Are they confident that’s exactly what happened?” Sophronia held on to her guilt.

“They should have made the suit impermeable to aether, if that’s even possible, but they only thought to try to salvage his tether. If anyone should feel guilty, it’s the people who sent him up there in the first place. It’s been concluded that vampires can’t go into the aetherosphere, ever. A major scientific breakthrough, so at least he didn’t sacrifice himself for nothing.” Vieve dimpled at her hopefully.

“But if the school could have followed his fall faster? If Shrimpdittle hadn’t… if I hadn’t tricked Shrimpdittle into…”

“Stop being so hard on yourself, Sophronia.”

“Will he recover? Will he be mad forever? Will he die?”

“They don’t know. Matron has never heard of such an extreme case of tether snap, even without the added aether exposure. There is no precedent. He’ll be put under guard, but he may never regain his senses. Or he could expire within the hour.”

Sophronia did not feel any better. She thought she might rush to Professor Braithwope's quarters and offer up her blood. She felt she should admit her guilt to Lady Linette. She wanted to do penance. Instead, numb with horror, she allowed herself to be shuffled along to a ball.

In no time whatsoever, those who had been invited to Monique's ball, a *select* group of almost half the school and all the visiting Bunson's boys, disembarked. A veritable herd of hansom cabs awaited them.

Sophronia, Sidheag, Agatha, Dimity, Pillover, and Lord Mersey crammed into one together. Felix arranged it so he could sit between Sophronia and the door.

"How are you this evening, Miss Temminnick?" He was looking quite handsome. His evening dress was impeccable—crisp whites and silken blacks.

Sophronia could hardly believe such a man as this held her in genuine regard. "Well enough, Lord Mersey," she replied, uncomfortable with his proximity. She could feel the warmth of the length of his thigh against hers, even through all her skirts.

"Still upset, Ria, my sweet? Your gentle heart moved by this evening's calamity?"

Sophronia studied him from under her eyelashes. "Yes, I must admit, I was shaken. To see a man fall like that."

Felix patted her gloved hand. "Not a man, a vampire, and they are made of stern stuff. You must rise above it."

Unfortunate choice of words, thought Sophronia. "Oh, yes, thank you for such kind thoughts."

"To be sure, Ria, my dear. You lean on me if you are feeling unwell. Don't tax yourself this evening. And I demand the dinner set and the last dance, in order to better see to your health."

Dimity, on Sophronia's other side, stiffened at this audacity.

Sophronia pretended to blush. She couldn't blush on cue yet, but she *could* pretend. She lowered her eyelids and fanned herself with her free hand. "Lord Mersey. You already have the third. That would be *three* dances. I think not. As to the dinner, I said I would think about it."

“Well?”

“I’m still thinking.”

Felix looked appropriately chastised.

Such games we play, thought Sophronia, rather tired of the whole thing. *As if I didn’t have to hedge and speak in code most of the time, I must now do it as part of regular social interactions. No wonder Mademoiselle Geraldine’s has such success training the female aristocracy to be intelligencers. It’s most of our life already*. For some inexplicable reason, in a horse-drawn carriage on the way to a ball, sitting in close proximity to another boy, Sophronia found herself thinking of Soap. *He never plays any games with me*.

Felix was pressed against her, but she found herself thinking of Soap’s long arm about her waist. She crushed the upwelling of warmth ruthlessly. *Soap is a friend. I don’t want to destroy that. I don’t want to change us*. Some small traitorous part of her whispered back, *Then what do you want?*

They arrived and Lord Mersey gallantly helped them all to descend from the carriage. Sophronia was first, so that by the time he had finished, she was already making her way into Walsingham House with Dimity. Felix was left to escort Agatha or drop the girl’s trembling hand and run after Sophronia in a most unseemly manner.

Walsingham House Hotel was beyond lavish, and the Frond Court Tea Room was particularly grand. Monique’s family must be very wealthy or very optimistic, for no expense was spared. The entire venue was decorated in a gold-and-cream tea theme. There were cream roses nested in large gold sugar bowls. The everyday chandelier had been replaced with one of lavish crystal in the shape of a massive teapot. No one but Monique had been permitted to wear gold, and she glided, in regal superiority, among the attendees in their muted pastels. A string quartet, sufficient but not boastfully large, sat in one corner near a raised dancing area. Long, lace-covered tables arrayed along one wall groaned under bowls of golden punch and cream-colored nibbles. The punch was served in teacups, the comestibles on saucers. All the food was made to look like tea cakes, whether sweet or savory. This got a mite confusing, but everything tasted delicious.

Sophronia did not want to be impressed, but she was. It made her sister Petunia’s coming-out ball seem provincial by comparison.

Several guests had already arrived—enough young men to make up the numbers, some elderly ladies to act as chaperones, and a full service of flaxen-haired, arrogant fops who could only be Monique's relations. As the room began to fill, Sophronia noticed a bevy of dandies, slightly older and more refined than might be expected, take up position near the punch. The vampire Lord Ambrose lurked to one side. Captain Niall stood in the opposite corner. He saw Sophronia's group enter, his top hat tilted in Sidheag's direction like an arrow of inquisition. Sidheag nodded at him shyly.

Having played the appropriate ode to Her Majesty, the band struck up a waltz. Titters of shock permeated the room, excitement from young ladies and disapproval from chaperones. To have a small band was elegance; to commence a ball with a waltz was very daring *indeed*.

Nevertheless, Monique's first partner, Lord Dingleproops, led her gamely out onto the floor, and after a stanza or two, others followed. Lord Mersey accosted Sophronia, who gave him her hand willingly, despite her earlier reticence. He was the best-looking boy in the room and probably the highest ranking. With Dimity swinging happily around on some dandy's arm, a man almost as sparkly as she, and Pillover doing his duty by Agatha, Sophronia felt she might as well take to the floor. Besides, she was tolerably certain Felix wasn't getting the dinner dance, so she might as well take advantage of his interest. Even Sidheag was whirling about in the arms of a boy taller and gawkier than she.

Felix was an excellent dancer, his hand warm and firm at the small of her back. His frame was a little tight, drawing her in close enough for disapproval, but there was such a crush the chaperones did not notice. Sophronia looked up into his eyes for a long moment before lowering her gaze and allowing him time to recover. He did seem a little breathless for a waltz that was limited in aestheticism by the size of the venue and the number of dancers.

It was for him to open dialogue, which he did after they had learned each other's rhythm. "You're a wonderful dancer, Ria."

"Mademoiselle Geraldine's takes such things seriously."

"Ah. And how many ways do you know to kill me, while we dance?"

"Only two, but give me time."

"You have lovely eyes. Has anyone ever told you that?"

“What rot. They are a muddy green. What are you about, Lord Mersey?”

Felix sighed, looking genuinely perturbed. His air of ennui was shaken. “I am *trying* to court you. Truth be told, Miss Temminnick, you make it ruddy difficult!”

“Language, Lord Mersey.” Sophronia felt her heart flutter strangely. *Am I ready to be courted?*

“See!”

“Bunson’s and Geraldine’s don’t mix. We practice, but we don’t finish, not with each other.”

“It’s happened before.”

“You mean the Plumleigh-Teignmotts? Yes, but they both had to give it up.”

“Give what up?”

“Their training.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me, Ria. I’m asking you to let me court you.”

“To what end, exactly, if not marriage?”

Felix winced.

“I’m not willing to stop learning. Are you?” Despite her guilt over Professor Braithwope’s fall, as she said it Sophronia knew this was true. “As I understand it, we serve different masters.”

“Precisely why it might be fun.”

“I will not be used as some boyish excuse for rebellion.”

“You see what I mean? Difficult! I like it.”

“You’re a loon.”

“And you’re a silver swan sailing on liquid dreams.”

Sophronia giggled. “Stop that. This is getting us nowhere.”

“So may I court you?”

Sophronia looked over his shoulder, feeling dizzy. From the waltzing, of course. She stalled for time and then…

“Where’s Dimity?”

Felix was thrown by the sudden switch in topic.

“And Pillover! Where’s Pillover?”

Sophronia scanned the crowd frantically. There was the dandy who *had* been dancing with Dimity; he was now dancing with Agatha. The Plumleigh-Teignmott siblings were gone! Sophronia looked to the back of

the crowd near the punch bowl. Lord Ambrose was also gone. Sidheag was still with her tall partner. Captain Niall lurked on the sidelines, his eyes on Lady Kingair with an odd expression in them. With no time to analyze any of it, Sophronia broke away from Felix.

"Are you leaving me in the middle of a dance *again*?" She'd done exactly the same thing to him the night they danced at Petunia's coming-out ball. He grabbed for her arm. "I'll stop being silly. I promise."

"This is not a cut, Felix. I must go fix something."

"Why is it always your problem to fix, Ria?"

"Because I see that there *is* a problem when no one else does."

With nothing more to say than that, Sophronia Angelina Temminnick did the rudest thing she had ever done in all her life: she left a high-ranking peer of the realm standing alone in the middle of a waltz. For the *second* time of their acquaintance. *Oh, dear*, she thought, *he might never forgive me*.

Sophronia was just in time. She saw the hem of Dimity's gown, a strikingly bold peach-and-brown pattern not unlike a sun-bleached tiger, disappear inside a private carriage outside the hotel. She could also hear the sound of muffled yelling.

The driver struck up the horses, but not before Sophronia hiked up her skirts, ran down after them, and leapt up to the back step, a place ordinarily occupied by footmen in livery. It was not a perch designed for a ball gown, nor were any meant to stand there when moving at speed, but Sophronia held on. *No one is kidnapping my Dimity!*

The carriage careened through the streets at a dangerous pace, slowing only when traffic demanded. After a relatively short distance, it drew to a halt on a quiet domestic avenue. Sophronia jumped down and to the side, turning her head away from the carriage and pretending to walk along the pavement as if out for a stroll. Alone. In a ball gown. The door to the carriage opened behind her. She could not turn without arousing suspicion, so she proceeded at an unhurried pace until she was around the far corner of the street. Once there, she inched up close to the last house and peeked back around, cursing a fashion that dictated young ladies wear pale colors and

big puffed skirts. She was undeniably visible.

Her position afforded her the opportunity to watch the carriage draw around to wait, having disgorged its contents. Sophronia ruminated. *Lord Ambrose, who does he belong to? Is he a rove like Professor Braithwope or is this a hive house? How do I find out? I don't even know which part of London I'm in*. A number of fashionably dressed individuals came and went, as if it were visiting hours. The visitors were not dressed for dinner, and they did not stay long. Sophronia observed for some three-quarters of an hour, hoping for an indication of… something.

Eventually, a young man in full evening dress sauntered up to the house. He had a nondescript face, good-looking enough, with a clean, straight nose and no mustache. He took off his hat to salute whoever opened the door. In the light cast by the hallway, Sophronia recognized him. He was the man who'd tried to get the prototype from Monique and the Pickleman at Petunia's ball. The man from Westminster. Sophronia had thought him a government employee, but now it was clear that this man was a Westminster *Hive* drone and this was the hive house. Lord Ambrose must be a member as well. The hive wanted Dimity and Pillover. *Oh, dear, I did hope it was the Picklemen. Vampires complicate matters, being all supernatural and hard to sneak around*. Clearly, the vampires wanted to press matters with Dimity's parents. The Plumleigh-Teignmotts must be the only ones who knew how to make the guidance valves. The vampires wanted to either manufacture and sell the technology or destroy it.

Sophronia was wise enough not to take on a hive alone and without preparation. Dimity and Pillover were on their own until she could return with reinforcements. Sophronia could only hope that her two friends would be of no use to the vampires dead. *Oh, Dimity, please remember* some *of your training*.

She turned her attention to hiring transport, but the roadways were still —not a single hansom to be seen. Then a fly came barreling down the cross street, drawn by matched white geldings and driven by two dandies of the highest order. One might even have called them fops, their trousers were so loud and their collar points so high. Sophronia glanced away; she did not want to be thought a light skirt. She had no time for shenanigans.

To her horror, the fly drew up next to her.

"What ho, little miss!" yodeled one of the dandies. His hair was a lovely

pale gold, his face almost iridescent in the moonlight. He wore an outfit of silver and royal blue, accented with pure white.

The other, a young man with ebony skin like Soap, although with none of Soap's streetside aura, looked to his companion. "My lord, we are very close to Westminster. Should we be stopping in their territory?" His outfit was all soft peaches and dove grays with cream, a perfect complement to the other's clear colors.

"For a brief moment, I think, Pilpo, dear. They are accustomed to my sport."

"But, my lord…"

The gold-haired dandy smiled at Sophronia, showing a hint of fang.

I spend my whole life without vampires, and in the space of one year I've met far too many.

"One of Mademoiselle Geraldine's girls, methinks," he said. "You have the *aura*."

Sophronia blinked up at him, shocked.

"My dear child, did you think you and yours were the only players?"

Sophronia narrowed her eyes in the direction of the hive house.

"And Westminster," the vampire added, confirming her suspicions.

Sophronia said, "And Bunson's, and the Picklemen, and the potentate, and now—who, my dear sir, are *you*? If you will excuse my asking directly."

"Oh, I'm not *important*. Would you like a lift, little *lavender bud*?"

Sophronia considered this. *Lavender bud?*

The vampire dandy said, "Normally, my *dear* dewdrop, I prefer not to interfere. It's so much more *fun* to observe. But even I'm loath to leave an innocent young lady alone and entirely without protection on the streets of gay London-town."

Sophronia thought on the matter. She might be getting herself into more trouble, accepting a lift from a strange vampire—well dressed though he might be. But he wasn't threatening, and Dimity and Pillover desperately needed her. Besides, this man was well informed. Perhaps he might engage in some lucrative conversation.

With a nod, she allowed herself to be helped in by the other dandy, who took up position on the footman's perch of the fly, allowing Sophronia to sit next to the driver. Said driver gave her a charming, if fanged, smile, and

whipped the horse into a trot.

How to Be a Dandy

The foppish vampire was not very forthcoming, although he found Sophronia's attempts to extract information highly diverting.

"Are you acquainted with the members of that household?" was her first foray, alluding to the Westminster Hive as they sprang down the street.

He rebutted with, "The house on the corner? Not at *all*, sweet almond flower."

"No, the house in the middle. The one with the birches at the front."

"I know them by *reputation*, of course, but who doesn't?"

Sophronia raised her eyebrows at him. "Me. I don't."

"Oh, my dear sugarplum, aren't you *precious*."

"Westminster Hive. Lord Ambrose. That's what I've got so far. I don't suppose…" She trailed off hopefully. He seemed like such a nice jolly fellow.

The nice jolly fellow gave a nice jolly laugh. "Curious as a kitten. Aren't you, puss? No, dear, no. I think a lift is more than enough interference. As I said, I do try not to participate as a rule. Although, this is unusual hive behavior for so *early* in the Season. What *are* they about?"

Sophronia said, hoping for an exchange, "I think it's all to do with Mr. Giffard's new dirigible."

"Do you indeed? And how is poor Aloysius Braithwope?"

"Not well, last I heard."

"Ah, dear, that's only to be expected with such an unfortunate mustachio."

“You know him?”

“We *all* know one another, puss-puss.”

“What do you want?” Sophronia was moved to exasperation.

“Me? Stockings and breeches to come back into fashion. I do so miss seeing a man’s calves.”

Sophronia swallowed down a startled giggle as the fly drew up in front of Walsingham House Hotel. “No, *vampires*. What do you vampires want?”

The blond fop looked at her, cocking his beautiful head to one side like a bird. “The same thing you want, my kitten.”

What do I want, right now? Information. Is that all the vampires are after? Information.

Pilpo jumped down and offered her his hand. A sweet flash of a smile crossed his face.

Sophronia stepped down and turned back to look up into the fly.

“There’s a difference between us, you realize?”

“Indeed? Oh, *please* enlighten me, kitten.” The vampire’s blue eyes sparkled in excitement.

“I only want information. You people want to control it.”

The blond threw his head back and laughed. “So wise for one so young. Most diverting! I must remember you, *little puss-puss*. Normally, I don’t bother with the fairer sex. I think I might make an exception in your case.”

“Thank you for the compliment, but I’d really rather you didn’t.” Sophronia hadn’t meant to catch his eye. The last thing she needed was a vampire interfering in her life.

“Now, now, don’t close all your doors, kitten. When you are finished, remember me. I believe I might even take on the potentate for your indenture. Such sharp little claws as Geraldine’s can provide will look lovely on you, and *only I* can make certain that they have diamond sparkles.”

Sophronia said nothing to that. He was right, best not to close all doors. After all, she was only recently considering how expensive her chosen profession might be. Wealthy patrons were not easy to come by, and she had a feeling this one would at least not expect a connubial relationship.

She said only, “Thank you very much for the lift, kind sir.”

“I am at your disposal, kitten.”

He was away before she could ask his name or his consequence. Nor,

she realized, had she been afforded the opportunity to give him hers. *I suppose he will know how to find me, if he wants*.

Sophronia trotted up the steps and back into the hotel, the odd encounter forgotten as she concentrated on the task at hand.

The ball was still in full sway, which was odd to Sophronia. She had the feeling ages must have passed, but a lively reel vibrated the floorboards of the Frond, and the celebration had continued despite her. She spotted Lady Linette instantly. The music teacher wore a bright pea-green-and-pink gown, vivid among the pastels of the young ladies. She was in conference with the potentate and Captain Niall. They all had worried expressions on their faces, and Sophronia wondered if her absence had been noted.

She was making her way over to them when a hand grabbed her arm.

"Where have you been?" hissed Felix.

"Not now, Lord Mersey!"

"You cut me. On the dance floor. Again. Miss Temminnick, you owe me an explanation."

Frustrated, Sophronia merely said, "Come with me if you must. I only have time to say this once."

They pushed their way through the crowd, ending up in front of the group of teachers.

Sophronia curtsied. "Lady Linette, Captain Niall, and Mr. Potentate, sir, please excuse the interruption."

"Yes, Miss Temminnick?"

"Dimity and Pillover Plumleigh-Teignmott have been kidnapped by the Westminster vampire hive."

"Miss Temminnick, what a shocking accusation!" Lady Linette clasped her hand to her breast.

Good technique, thought Sophronia.

The potentate looked down at her out of sharp green eyes as if she were some kind of bug in his tea. "I highly doubt that. Why on earth would the hive involve itself? I have everything under control."

"Have you any evidence?" asked Captain Niall, looking less doubtful.

"Only my own eyes. I followed Lord Ambrose's carriage to the house

itself."

"The *hive* house? You can't possibly know its location." The potentate would not believe a word of it.

"It wasn't difficult. I simply used the skills I have been taught. I know it's the hive because I recognized some of the members."

"Prove it!" demanded the potentate.

Quietly, cautious of being overheard, Sophronia described the hive house in detail, including the birches in front and the nondescript nature of the street. She did not recount her odd encounter with the fop vampire. Somehow she did not think this would help her cause.

"That proves nothing," said the potentate, "except that this child somehow knows what the Westminster Hive looks like."

"And how would she know that, if she hadn't visited it?" Felix wanted to know. He believed her. But then Sophronia was beginning to suspect that he would automatically believe the worst of any vampire.

The potentate looked down his long nose at the boy. "And who, may I ask, are *you*?"

"Golborne, sir, Lord Mersey."

"Picklemen's get? I should have known they'd be mixed up in this." The potentate turned on Sophronia. "You working for them, little girl?"

Lady Linette stepped in at that. "My Lord Potentate! Miss Temminnick is only at the beginning of her training. She isn't *working* for anyone… yet!"

The potentate was unconvinced. Glancing over the crowd of dancers, he said, "Ah, look, there's Ambrose. He can sort this out."

Lord Ambrose was lurking at the edge of the crowd, looking as if he had never left. The potentate summoned him over with a rude crook of the finger. The other vampire responded, a pleasant expression on his handsome face.

Of course, Lord Ambrose denied the accusation. "The Plumleigh-Teignmott children, you say? I suspect the father will have removed them, Lady Linette. I understand he is back working with the Picklemen."

"No!" gasped Lady Linette. "He never. His wife would never countenance it!"

"Oh, yes, indeed. She's helping." The handsome vampire shook his head in mock regret. "Shrimpdittle has been most forthcoming. I excused myself

to read this report on his interrogation." His lip curled. "He claims the Plumleigh-Teignmotts are intending mass production of the crystalline guidance valves for sale to the British market. The Picklemen want controlling concerns." He handed over a bit of rolled parchment paper. "I bet that upsets the government's plans, eh, Potentate?"

Sophronia glanced at Felix. The boy's face was inscrutable.

She realized that if the Picklemen were backing Dimity's parents' research, then the Westminster Hive had been trying to stop them all along. They'd used Monique to try to steal the original prototype months ago, and when that didn't work, they'd started trying to kidnap Dimity and Pillover. *But my school and the potentate are also involved. Are they mere bystanders, simply trying to ensure that the technology works properly? Or are they trying to gain control of the valves for the Shadow Council and the British government?* The Picklemen stood to make a great deal of money off those valves and control who had access to them. Westminster Hive clearly didn't like that idea and obviously didn't trust the potentate to put a stop to it. So they were trying to get hold of the valve technology themselves. Even if vampires could never travel in the aetherosphere, Sophronia suspected they would love to control which humans could.

She opened her mouth to protest, to explain this, but Lady Linette shushed her firmly. Good manners forced Sophronia into disgruntled silence.

Lady Linette perused the contents of Shrimpdittle's confession. "I should think Mrs. Plumleigh-Teignmott would at least have notified me of the family's intent to remove the children from my supervision."

"You know scientists, easily distracted."

Lady Linette looked again at the paper. "Are they really sending Shrimpdittle into exile?"

Lord Ambrose nodded. "The continent, as I understand."

"Ah, well, I suppose he couldn't be allowed to teach anymore."

Sophronia felt an intense sensation of relief. At least Shrimpdittle wasn't to be imprisoned or hanged, simply consigned to the wilds of Switzerland. She glared at Lord Ambrose. *I could confront him directly, accuse him of the kidnapping, but they're bound to believe an adult over me. I've no real proof.*

Blast good manners. She made the attempt. "But I saw—"

“You were obviously mistaken,” interrupted Lord Ambrose.

Sister Mattie entered the ball and came bustling over to them. “My dears, Professor Braithwope is awake and lucid. He is asking for you, My Lord Potentate.”

Lady Linette nodded. “You’d best get along, then, my lord.”

The potentate agreed. “Ambrose?”

“Oh, no, I’ll remain here. A ball with such tempting morsels is so very diverting.”

Lady Linette slapped his arm flirtatiously with her fan. “Now, now, keep your fangs to yourself, good sir.”

Lord Ambrose bowed to her. “Of course, dear lady, but perhaps *you* would honor me with a dance?”

“La, sir, how charming.”

He whirled her off onto the floor, both of them dancing expertly.

Sophronia realized she was on her own in mounting a rescue attempt. She began cataloging her options. *I require supplies and a change of clothes*. There was nothing for it; she would have to return to the airship. *Plus, I’ll need the hive house’s actual address*. She looked at Captain Niall. The werewolf was the only adult who might help her. *I’ll wager he knows the location*. She started planning. *Sidheag would be useful as well*.

“Would you mind a little company on your drive back?” Sophronia looked with wide eyes at Sister Mattie. “I find I am rather bored with this ball.”

Everyone looked at her as though they had forgotten her existence.

Sister Mattie said, “Are you certain, dear? It looks like quite the treat.” Her tone was wistful.

Felix protested as well. “But I had two more dances with you.”

“How kind you are, dear Lord Mersey, but another time? Perhaps you might escort me out?” Sophronia used her best wheedling tone.

Felix had no choice. As a gentleman, he could do nothing but offer her his arm. He did so with grace if not alacrity.

Sophronia added, “And I believe Lady Kingair would also like to depart.”

Captain Niall, who was looking at Sophronia out of the corner of his eye, said, “I think I’ll be going as well.”

The potentate offered Sister Mattie his arm, and they pushed through the

crowd. Captain Niall followed, grabbing at Sidheag's sleeve in a lightning-fast move.

Sidheag left off her position, lurking partnerless near a potted palm, and trailed along with only mild confusion. She was game for anything that removed her from a ball. Plus, as she had once said to Sophronia, "Life's always more interesting when I chum about with you."

"What's going on?" She craned her neck back and whispered to Sophronia.

"I'll explain when we're more secure." Sophronia glanced meaningfully at the potentate's back.

"Where's Dimity?" Sidheag asked.

"Otherwise occupied."

"Oh, dear."

"Exactly."

Sophronia turned to her escort and said in a low voice, "Lord Mersey, I know *you* believe my story." She batted her eyelashes at him purposefully. "I was thinking there might be others who would be… interested… in Dimity's current location."

Felix blinked at her.

Lord save me, thought Sophronia, *from boys without training*. She nudged him with her elbow. "You know. *Others*."

"Oh, yes, I see. Well, perhaps after the ball Father might, or…" Felix trailed off, Sophronia's expression telling him she was profoundly disappointed. "Perhaps sooner," he amended his speech.

They reached the street where the potentate's carriage—a landau with footmen in full royal livery—stood waiting for them.

With the potentate, Sister Mattie, and Sidheag safely ensconced within, Captain Niall stood patiently waiting to hand Sophronia up. He was looking particularly well, especially by comparison to the werewolves from earlier that evening. Certainly his top hat was tied on, but he'd forgone the ubiquitous greatcoat for an impeccable black velvet cutaway jacket and matched trousers with a cream brocade waistcoat. His dark hair, longer than was fashionable, was brushed to silken, glossy waves. No wonder young ladies swooned. Felix was handsome in his brooding way, but next to Captain Niall he was boyish.

Sophronia leaned in and kissed Felix gently on the cheek, a reward for

good behavior. “Thank you, Felix, for your understanding and your help.” She lowered her eyelashes prettily.

“Ria, you must be the most confusing girl I’ve ever met. You know I’m mad for you?”

“How kind of you to say.” Sophronia gave her hand to the werewolf and he assisted her inside.

“Good hunting?” commented Sidheag, watching Felix’s retreating back as Sophronia settled in next to her.

“Son of a duke” was Sophronia’s only comment.

The drive back to Hyde Park was fast, tense, and uncomfortable. The potentate spent most of the time lecturing Sophronia on bandying accusations about without proper foundation.

“Imagine a hive interfering in matters of state! Even Westminster wouldn’t dare. You are a stupid, fanciful child. Accusing vampires willfully like that. You’ve been corrupted by association with that Golborne boy!”

Sister Mattie at first didn’t understand what was happening and then tried to defend Sophronia. “But the embroidered cushions did suggest the hive objected. I mean, our intelligencer inside, she indicated that they were upset with Picklemen actions.”

Sophronia perked up at that statement. *So the embroidery was code—as I thought—detailing the danger between Westminster and the Picklemen. A spy from Mademoiselle Geraldine’s was trying to warn us from inside the hive. But when Madame Spetuna abandoned her post to infiltrate the flywaymen, there was no one to transport the cushions, and the warnings didn’t make it in time*.

But the potentate dismissed this evidence. “Poppycock! I cannot believe they would act without at least consulting me!”

Eventually, Sister Mattie merely tried to mollify him with platitudes. “Please, My Lord Potentate, try to remember that a pumpkin divided against itself cannot gourd!”

Sidheag followed the whole conversation in increasing bemusement, having no idea what was going on. Captain Niall held his tongue, stiff and uncomfortable in a vampire’s carriage. When they arrived back at the

airship, the werewolf got out and skulked away into the night. Sophronia had no doubt he would wait for them groundside. He was no fool, Captain Niall.

Back on board, the potentate strode off to visit Professor Braithwope with one last sharp reprimand in Sophronia's direction.

"You keep your opinions to yourself, little girl!"

Sister Mattie looked at her, face wrinkled with worry. "I'll endeavor to keep him occupied, dears. But please remember, a lily cannot change its spots."

As soon as it was safe to speak, Sidheag turned to Sophronia in frustration.

"What on earth is going on?"

"I don't think much of our school's patron, I'll tell you that much," said Sophronia, glaring at the vampire's retreating back and sticking her tongue out at it childishly.

"Sophronia!"

"I'll explain while we change. We have a rescue to mount and a hive house to infiltrate."

"What?"

"Come on, please!"

"What are we changing into?" Sidheag asked as they hurried back to their rooms.

Sophronia thought about her encounter with the fashionable blond vampire. "Dandies. We need to look like dandies."

Sidheag pursed her lips. "I'm *not* cutting my hair."

They did their best with the disguises, dressing in a combination of Sidheag's trousers and their own lace under-blouses and velvet vests. Real dandies would have had better-fitting clothing, not to mention superior cravats. The two girls ended up looking like something that came from an underfunded circus.

"We are ridiculous." Sidheag adjusted her coat in the mirror. "And you don't have a jacket."

"Preshea has one of those new little short ones, you know, like the bullfighters of Spain." Sophronia went off on a raid, returning with a bright red-and-gold bolero of which Preshea was particularly proud. Sophronia put it on.

“God’s teeth,” said Sidheag succinctly.

They did look preposterous, but Sophronia felt that would throw people off if they were caught. “Here, wrap this blue scarf around your waist, and I’ll do the same with Dimity’s fringed yellow one, and we can say we have been attending a fancy dress ball.”

Sidheag did as she was told. “What will Captain Niall think of us?”

“Does that matter, so long as he gets us there? I do hope we have lessons soon on how to memorize locations. I’m annoyed with myself for not knowing how to get back to the hive.”

“Better to worry about how absurd we look! No one in their right mind would let us into their house. Wait, hive? What *hive*?”

Sophronia explained about Dimity and Pillover being kidnapped by Lord Ambrose and the Westminster Hive.

“I think the vampires want to force their parents to either stop making the guidance valves altogether or hand control of the technology over to the hive. Dimity’s parents are reportedly working for the Picklemen, and the vampires don’t trust Picklemen. Nor do I. For that matter, I just don’t trust any of them.” While she talked, she stashed anything she could think of that might be useful about her person—smelling salts in the waistcoat pocket, sewing scissors down the front of her corset, ribbon around her wrist, and a perfume-soaked handkerchief up one sleeve.

“I’m confused. Sabotage or not, this is clearly a technology vampires canna utilize.”

“I think that’s why they’re panicking. They’re trying to ensure this mode of travel is under their influence.”

Sidheag understood at that. “Can’t have the prey bouncing about through the aetherosphere all willy-nilly, now can they?”

“Sidheag, you think like a predator.”

The Lady of Kingair glowed in pleasure. “Thank you very much, Sophronia. What a nice thing to say.”

They were discussing whether to climb around the outside of the ship or save time by running the inside corridors but risk the mechanical alarm when Vieve showed up.

“What’s going on?” demanded the scamp.

“Get us to engineering fast and I’ll tell you,” replied Sophronia.

“My pleasure.” Vieve whipped out her obstructor.

As they negotiated the halls at a jog, blasting one mechanical after another, Sophronia panted out her story again.

Vieve believed her without question. “Makes far more sense for the vampires to want to influence Dimity’s parents than old Ambrose’s excuse. Can’t understand why Lady Linette would believe him.”

Sophronia said, “This school has a vampire patron and a vampire teacher. Lady Linette *wants* to believe him. She wants to believe the potentate has control over the hives and that they aren’t kidnapping her students on a whim. I think Sister Mattie and Professor Braithwope, were he capable, are on our side. Captain Niall certainly is.”

“He would be. Werewolves always suspect vampires.” Vieve nodded gravely.

The sooties, after their conquest of the upper atmosphere, were mostly resting. A minimal crew kept the boilers at temperature—maintaining a steady position, heat for the residential sections, and power to the mechanicals.

The three girls dressed as boys clattered in and through the relative quiet without raising any suspicion. Even if two of them looked like an operatic take on bull-herding Spaniards.

Sophronia hoped Soap was also asleep; somehow she knew he’d be difficult if he found out what she was up to.

“Crikey, don’t you two look as fancy as fleas’ eyebrows!” said Soap, appearing behind her.

“Yes, well, it’s necessary.” Sophronia was short with her friend.

“Necessary? Those trousers are awful tight.” Soap’s eyes were wide. “Not that you don’t fill them out right, miss.” He lost his train of thought. “Oh, blast it.”

Sophronia came to his rescue. “We need to be able to cast doubt on a third party, in case we’re caught.”

“Caught doing what, exactly?” Soap demanded.

Vieve, little blabbermouth, answered him brightly, “Infiltrating a hive house.”

Soap’s dark eyes went worried. “Miss, is that a good idea?”

Sophronia gave up keeping him out of it. “No. It’s a dangerous, vampire-riddled mission, but they have kidnapped Dimity and Pillover.”

“I’m coming,” said Soap instantly.

“Now, Soap, you haven’t the training.” But Sophronia was already reconfiguring her plan to include him.

“And you aren’t finished with yours. At least I’ve experienced life.” The boy was already stripping out of his coal apron.

“Oh, very well. No time to argue. I’m worried about Dimity. She’s good but only in short bursts. Plus, can you imagine her in a hive house? All that loose blood lying about.”

Soap said, “Coming, Vieve?”

Vieve shook her head. “Off-ship adventuring is not for me anymore. I’d sooner stay behind and provide the gadgets.”

Sophronia was relieved at that; she really would have had to put her foot down. At seventeen, Soap was grown and able to decide for himself. Vieve was too young to go breaking into vampire hives and too cheeky to take such things seriously.

The three went out the floor hatch, shimmying down the rope ladder.

“So,” said Soap, “where exactly are we going, and how do we get there?”

“My questions exactly,” said Captain Niall, coming up behind them out of the dark.

Sophronia looked at him expectantly. “Westminster Hive. Coming, sir?”

“Oh, *really*, young lady!” He had changed out of his evening dress to his customary greatcoat.

Sophronia blinked at him.

“Dressed like that?”

Blink, blink, blink.

“With a sootie and Lady Kingair?”

“Someone has to get Dimity and Pillover out, sir. And you can’t do it alone. Now, can you?”

“Who said I—”

Sidheag interrupted. “He couldn’t do it regardless. The vampires would know the moment a wolf entered their hive.”

Sophronia made herself look expectant and wide-eyed. “But he can *get* us there. Sir, you *have* to help.”

“I do?”

“You believe me.”

“I do.” The werewolf was defeated by such logic.

“And you know where it is, don’t you?”

“I do.” Captain Niall sighed. “I’m going to get in a great deal of trouble for this. Very well, hop on.” With that, he changed form.

Werewolf change is an unpleasant thing to watch, and poor Soap had never seen it before. He yelped as the handsome captain went from being a fine specimen of manhood to a large, rangy wolf with a top hat tied to his head, squatting in a pool of fallen greatcoat.

Sophronia tried not to hear the way Captain Niall’s bones broke and knit back together with crunching noises. She tried not to see the way the man’s silky hair grew down and became fur, spreading like mold over his body.

Soap was quietly and efficiently sick behind a pile of cast-iron pilings. He bravely returned once the change was complete, although he was distinctly uncomfortable with the alteration. “Oh, miss, do we have to ride *that*?”

Sophronia, who had ridden a wolf only once before, pretended confidence. “It’s actually a pleasant way to travel.”

“I doubt that, miss.”

“You can go in the middle.”

If Soap felt his manliness in question over such an offer, he didn’t say so.

Sophronia climbed up front, her legs tucked up high. She gripped Captain Niall’s furry neck with her knees and his ruff with her hands. Soap climbed on after, wrapping both arms around her waist in a death grip. It was very intimate, especially with only a few layers of masculine clothing between them. However, Soap seemed too frightened to take advantage of the situation. Sidheag, accustomed to werewolf transport, took the rear, over the beast’s haunches, the most difficult seat to maintain. She gripped Soap’s waist in turn. The wolf was only just big enough, but he was certainly strong enough, and he took off at a pace more rapid than any horse could manage.

Misbehaving with Purpose

Captain Niall carried them directly to the hive. Sophronia recognized the neighborhood instantly. He was wise enough to go nowhere near the front door but let them off at a back alley near the kitchen entrance, where merchants delivered goods and servants came and went.

Sophronia marshaled her troops. “Soap, would you go in the back? We will need a warning in case of unexpected visitors. If anyone sees you, how about pretending you’re there to clean the chimneys?”

“At this hour?”

“Best I can think up on short notice. Sidheag and I are going in the front.”

“Barefaced?” Sidheag protested.

“Can you think of a better plan?”

“Who do we represent?” Sidheag asked.

“We’re dandy drones of a local rove vampire. We’ve been sent to find out what’s going on. We heard they kidnapped children, and our master does not approve. It’s worth a try.”

Captain Niall, still in wolf form, looked very worried.

Sophronia, thinking herself quite daring at giving a teacher instructions, even if he did look a bit doglike, said, “If you could stay to assist the retreat, Captain? Or go get the authorities, if you think they would come. Your decision.”

The werewolf sat back on his haunches with an air of decisiveness. He’d wait.

“He can’t carry five of us,” protested Sidheag. “I mean, if we are, by some miracle, successful in retrieving Dimity and Pillover.”

The werewolf growled.

Sidheag understood wolf growls. “Fine, he *can* carry five of us, but five of us would not be able to fit on top of him.”

Sophronia waved a dismissive hand. “We’ll figure that out later. We really should be getting on.”

The two girls left the alley and made their way down the street to the front door of the Westminster Hive.

Sophronia practiced her walk and her mannerisms, doing her best to be a man of fashion. Sidheag, who looked more like a man, also already walked like one. Sophronia thought they might have applied fake mustaches to good effect, but otherwise they weren’t bad. *If only our clothes fit better*.

They strode up the steps and pulled the bell rope.

A handsome footman opened the door. “Yes?” His eyebrows raised up nearly into his hairline at the sight before him. “… Sirs?”

“We have come to pay a call,” announced Sophronia, deepening her voice.

“Indeed. And who has sent you?”

Sophronia wiggled her fingers in dismissal. “Oh, *you* know.”

The footman pursed his lips, eyeing their attire. “Lord Akeldama *will* have his little jokes.”

Sophronia nodded, connecting the dandy vampire to the name. Professor Braithwope had mentioned that name in class recently. *What had he said? Oh, yes, that Lord Akeldama was frivolous but had standing*.

“Oh, yes, he does like jokes.” She twirled about slightly.

The footman frowned. “Are you in your cups? She won’t like that, you know. It hasn’t been a successful attempt. She’s out of humor.”

Sophronia stopped twirling. “He wants to know what’s going on.”

“He always does. He’s usually more subtle about it.”

Sophronia only looked up at the ceiling of the hallway as if bored by the conversation.

“Are you a new drone?” the footman pressed.

Silence.

“I suppose you had best come in. Who shall I say has called?”

“Lord Dingleproops and Lord Mersey,” said Sophronia.

“Sounds like him,” said the footman.

He took them into the front parlor. “Wait here, if you please? She’s almost done with her current.”

Sophronia and Sidheag waited. The door was left slightly ajar. They watched in horror as two other footmen walked by carrying the comatose form of a young lady with thick honey-brown hair.

“Pity,” one was saying. “She had such neat stitches.”

The girl’s neck was savaged, her hair matted with blood.

Sophronia put a hand to her own mouth in horror, thinking for one terrified moment that it was Dimity.

“She will keep trying for a new queen. I think she’s lost the ability.”

“Wouldn’t let *her* hear you say that if I were you.”

Sidheag grasped Sophronia supportively by the arm. “Not Dimity,” she whispered.

“No, the dress is too somber.” Sophronia felt like she could breathe again.

The hallway cleared. A moment later they heard a familiar voice say, “I should return right away! It is, after all, *my* ball. Thank the countess for me, would you please? Such a delightful lady. So sorry the metamorphosis failed. It’s nice to know she has everything to hand. Or should I say, to fang?” A forced giggle.

Sophronia and Sidheag exchanged terrified glances. “Monique!”

They turned their backs to the open parlor door.

Monique, unfortunately, noticed that the vampire’s next callers were two young men of fashion waiting in the front parlor.

“Well, *good evening*, gentlemen! I do hope your audience is as enjoyable as mine.”

Sophronia pulled out her handkerchief. *Never be without one, Lady Linette always says. So wise*. She pretended a coughing fit into it and turned slightly to wave her free hand at Monique.

“Oh, dear, sir, are you unwell?” Monique smiled flirtatiously.

Sidheag, meanwhile, bent down to buff a bit of lint off her boot.

“Simply a touch of the consumption, miss,” said Sophronia gruffly into her handkerchief.

“Oh, well, do take care.” Monique looked as though she might enter the room to converse further, but the footman, standing behind her, cleared his

throat.

“Oh, yes, of course *she* is waiting. Lovely to meet you, gentlemen. Oh, dear, I suppose we haven’t met. I’m Monique de Pelouse.” Monique was executing the confused-but-coy-and-charming maneuver.

Sophronia and Sidheag both bowed. Sidheag kept her head turned away. Sophronia kept her handkerchief pressed to the lower half of her face.

The footman said sharply, “Miss!”

Monique sparkled at them. “Well, any friend of the countess’s is a friend of mine. I’m having a ball at this very moment at Walsingham House, if you gentlemen would like to join me there later? You’d be more than welcome.”

Sophronia murmured an assent.

Monique clapped her hands. “Capital. Now, do pardon me?” She drifted away.

The footman returned after letting her out into the night.

Sophronia said, in a shocked tone, “Who was *that* forward bit of baggage?”

The footman was disapproving. “New drone, so green. My apologies, gentlemen. We thought witnessing metamorphosis would dampen her enthusiasm. The metamorphosis failed, and she’s as bad as ever.”

Sophronia and Sidheag exchanged startled looks. *Monique has found herself a new patron in the Westminster Hive already? Powerful connection. She must be involved in Dimity and Pillover’s kidnapping*.

Sophronia nodded sympathetically to the footman. “Our condolences on the loss of the female drone.”

“Poor girl. A very talented embroiderer, so fast. I’ve never seen one better or more obsessed with decorating throw pillows.”

Oh, no, Sophronia thought, *the school’s spy. The intelligencer who tried to warn us with embroidered cushions. Did the hive figure out she was a spy and kill her in the guise of metamorphosis?* She felt a cold sweat spring up all over her body and hoped vampires couldn’t smell fear.

“It’s what happens.” The footman looked philosophical. “Haven’t made a new queen in decades. Not likely to change with drones like that Miss Pelouse. She needs a good deal of refinement.”

Sophronia said sagely, “They always do.”

The footman gave her a look that suggested a man in a red bolero ought not to comment on anyone else’s flaws.

Sophronia was defensive. “We came from a fancy dress ball, my good man.”

He looked mollified.

“No time to change,” added Sidheag.

Sophronia gave her a quelling look. That was more than enough. Gentlemen should not have to explain themselves to footmen! Even if they were all drones. The footman hadn’t earned his rank yet; the dandies had.

The footman led them to the rear of the hive. The house was remarkable, all beautiful artwork, modern furnishings, inventions of great worth, and priceless Persian rugs. The staff, gliding to and fro in expensive black-buttoned shoes and starched aprons, were all young and beautiful. The Westminster Hive, whatever else might be said of it, certainly had taste. Monique would fit right in, visually at least. Yet there was something about the place that troubled Sophronia. It felt like spoiled milk, only less smelly. All that plush carpeting muffled sound so that the servants moved noiselessly. And then there was the dead embroidering agent to consider. But it wasn’t only the silence, or that gruesome body; there was something missing.

In the back parlor sat a beautiful, plump woman, who was the focus of a great deal of attention. To her left stood a tall, reedy man with a reluctant hairline and to her right… Dimity and Pillover. Dimity was stretched out in a dead faint on a velvet ottoman. Pillover, white-faced and trembling, was taking tea.

Sophronia realized what had been bothering her so much about the hive house: there were no tracks, no faint noises of background steam, and no mechanicals. No mechanicals *at all*. The staff was entirely human. Sophronia had never seen anything like it in all her life.

The footman announced them. “Lord Dingleproops and Lord Mersey to call, my lady.”

Pillover gasped and stared at Sophronia and Sidheag. It was a small mistake, since his shock might be attributed to the egregiousness of their attire rather than previous acquaintance.

The plump woman could only be the Westminster Hive queen, Countess

Nadasdy. She was impeccably dressed to the height of style. She had on a gown with a very large skirt and a very tight bodice, although she was a tad round for such an outfit. She looked, Sophronia felt, a little like a milkmaid from a dairy farm—fond of cheese. Her cheeks were rosy and her manners light and gay, but she only seemed frivolous; those cornflower-blue eyes saw everything.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Welcome." Her voice was warm and soft, very ladylike.

Sophronia and Sidheag bowed deeply.

"Good evening, Countess," said Sophronia. "Our master tenders his warmest regards. Our condolences on your recent"—she paused delicately —"mis-fang."

"Oh, thank you. And thank him for me, will you please? Pity he could not send more appropriately dressed messengers." The woman tittered at her own insult.

"We were nearest to your abode when he heard the news. He felt time was pressing and sent us on immediately. We were attending a fancy dress ball over yonder." Sophronia waggled a hand in an unspecified direction. "Please excuse our eccentricity."

"Yes?" said the countess. "And what is his lordship's vaunted news? I did not publicize my intent to bite. Failure is all too often the outcome this century." Her gentleman companion put a consoling hand on her shoulder. She shrugged him off.

"Ah, no, you are correct—he did not know of that. No, he understands you have visitors."

"Oh?"

Sophronia wandered over to the couch, took out the smelling salts from her waistcoat pocket, and administered them to Dimity. None of the vampires objected. Dimity revived only to squawk at Sophronia—suddenly there and so peculiarly dressed.

"Hush now, child," condescended Sophronia.

Dimity's eyes widened, but she remembered her training and hushed, sitting fully upright.

Sophronia returned to stand next to Sidheag, crossing her arms. "Should you be involving yourself to such an extent? Kidnapping is a tad rude, wouldn't you say?"

The countess moved to sit next to the revived Dimity and placed a white hand on the girl's arm. Dimity shivered and looked down at her lap.

"Such harsh vocabulary, Lord Dingleproops. We merely *borrowed* them for a little. Didn't we, dears? And we've been having a lovely time of it, haven't we? So educational. Not every mortal gets a chance to witness metamorphosis. Even an unsuccessful metamorphosis." The countess dabbed at her mouth with an embroidered handkerchief as if remembering the blood that had recently been there.

Dimity looked as if she might faint again.

At which moment the parlor door burst open and Soap, carrying all those things needed to clean a chimney and a good deal more besides, clattered inside. He was covered in even more soot than usual, shedding it as he walked.

The countess let out a small scream. "My carpets!"

Sophronia was instantly on her guard. Soap wouldn't make a fuss unless he wanted to warn them of something.

The sootie doffed his cap at the august personages. "Evening, all. I'm here for the chimneys. Said I was to start with this room, if that suits."

"No, that certainly does *not* suit," said the countess.

"But madam, skinny as a *pickled gherkin*, I am. I fits, I assure you."

Oh, dear, thought Sophronia, picking up on Soap's hint, *we've got Picklemen coming*.

Mild chaos ensued, with the countess's staff trying to hustle Soap out of the room, struggling to stop him from shedding further. Soap dodged them and clanged loudly. The countess issued increasingly strident instructions.

Sophronia and Sidheag took the opportunity to shift closer to Dimity and Pillover.

"What are you doing here?" mouthed Dimity at them.

Sophronia made a small shushing gesture.

Into the madness strode a tall, elderly gentleman in a top hat with a band of green about it. He was followed by three similarly dressed men, a short lady in somber grays carrying a reticule shaped like a metal sausage dog, and Felix Mersey.

Sophronia thought, *Now we're really in the soup*.

The handsome footman followed, looking harried. "I tried to stop them, Countess, but they insisted, and he *is* a duke."

The tall, reedy vampire placed himself before the countess protectively. “Duke Golborne!”

“Duke Hematol,” replied the Pickleman.

My goodness, thought Sophronia, *Felix took my suggestion and involved his father, how remarkable. I may owe him another kiss*.

The short lady, who Sophronia realized was Madame Spetuna in a new disguise, put her reticule on the floor. The reticule puffed steam out its ears excitedly and trundled in Sophronia’s direction, tail wagging back and forth.

The countess shrieked even louder. “Mechanimal! Get that repulsive thing out of my hive!”

Several of the staff left off chasing Soap and dove for Bumbersnoot, who scuttled away at a much greater speed than Sophronia had thought him capable of.

The countess began fanning herself vigorously with a gold lace fan. Then she squealed a third time, for Bumbersnoot bumped against her foot. A maid dove after him, upsetting a lamp with a stained-glass shade.

Duke Hematol reached out with supernatural reflexes and caught the lamp before it fell.

This display of otherworldly prowess upset the head Pickleman, Felix’s father. He began to harangue the vampires, accusing them of all manner of dastardly deeds. The chief offense of which seemed to be trying to steal control of the crystalline guidance valve and its patents and production. Although they must have seen the body, no one cared about the girl who had been savaged. That, apparently, was ordinary vampire practice.

“We will not have Picklemen harnessing the aether and using it against us!” the Duke of Hematol said in defense of the vampire position. “Nor will we be ostracized from a technology that can change the course of human transport! We will not permit you to maintain sole control. Other possible applications for these valves are too dangerous.” It was like a heated debate in the House of Lords.

Soap, shrugging off all attempts at dismissal, went over to the fireplace and began clattering up it, causing as much ruckus as possible—more, in fact, than one might expect.

Bumbersnoot charged about with Westminster drones in hot pursuit.

Sophronia gave Dimity the nod.

Dimity cast herself prostrate at the feet of the Picklemen, begging them for salvation from imminent vampire doom. She claimed all manner of mistreatment at the hands of the countess. The tea was lukewarm. The biscuits stale. The seat cushion lumpy. And a girl had been bitten to death right in front of her! She demanded she be rescued instantly and rounded out her complaints with a plaintive explanation that she was missing a ball!

Bumbersnoot trundled over Dimity's elegantly draped skirts, pausing to nibble at a large purple bow, before dodging the grasping hands of a footman.

Pillover began arguing with his sister. Protesting that, for being kidnapped, they had actually been treated fairly and the tea was excellent. Sophronia wasn't certain if he was aware of the plan, which currently consisted of causing as much pandemonium as possible, or if he simply had a brother's objection to a sister's fibs.

Felix had spent the past few minutes staring at Sophronia, his mouth agape. He looked like a fish. A handsome fish, but a fish nonetheless. However, Sophronia knew it was only a matter of time before he got his voice back and demanded to know why she was dressed like a circus dandy. She made frantic silencing motions at him.

The two dukes moved from debating to yelling. The Pickleman claimed that the vampires had no right to go around kidnapping children and forcing the hand of perfectly respectable scientists. The vampire protested that any technology that excluded the supernatural ought to be banned outright.

Meanwhile, Soap upended the entire coal scuttle onto the fireplace stoop with a tremendous crash.

Bumbersnoot scalded a chambermaid, who screamed.

The countess stood up, trembling in agitation. No doubt her well-run household had never before seen such chaos.

Sophronia began making gentlemanly noises about everyone turning potty, mostly to add to the kerfuffle. Sidheag joined her, both of them attempting to sound as upmarket and foppishly offended as possible.

"This is going too far," insisted Sidheag, waving a handkerchief about her face. "Coal dust, in a hive, can you believe it?"

Sophronia spoke through gritted teeth. "Agreed. It's like the Marquis of Inkuppy and that dyed-blue poodle he will insist on carrying everywhere. It can't be permitted."

“What’s next, *green* champagne?”

“Or *leather* waistcoats?”

“Leather waistcoats! Dingle, you go too far!” Sidheag chortled, slapping Sophronia lightly on the arm. “Aren’t you a *hoot*?”

The Pickleman duke turned sharp eyes from his vampire foe to the oddly dressed dandies. “And who, pray tell, are you?”

“Who we *are* is not important. Who we *represent* is the tick.”

“Oh, and who might that be?”

Sophronia flashed her hand up into the air in a flamboyant gesture. “Who do you think?”

“Blast it. Is he also involved?”

“You know *he* doesn’t like to involve himself. You may think of us as mere observers.”

“Oh?”

Sophronia tilted her head coyly. “However, I believe we may have a solution to this madness. As a concerned third party, if we were remanded custody of the, um, borrowed property, perhaps you could all sort out the other aspects to your satisfaction, and our lord will return the children as needed.”

“I thought Lord Akeldama didn’t *like to involve himself*.” Both dukes looked suspicious.

Sophronia said, “He has an affection for children.”

“Father,” said Felix, tugging on the Pickleman’s sleeve.

“Not now, boy!”

“But, sir—”

“Silence!”

“Yes, sir.” Felix gave Sophronia a funny look.

Sophronia winked at him.

Strangely enough, the countess and the Picklemen actually considered Sophronia’s offer.

One of the other Picklemen said, “How do we know those two drones aren’t on your side, madam? Given that they are *still* working for a vampire. You would have a necessary alliance in place, after all.”

The countess waved an airy hand. “Oh, Lord Akeldama is as autonomous as any rove can be.”

“Certainly more than the potentate,” added Sophronia, pushing her

cause. That seemed the right thing to say.

Dimity started whining again, aiming to make herself as unwelcome as possible. Pillover grumbled at her to stop whinging. They resumed bickering. The countess and the Pickleman duke ordered them to be silent. At the same time, Soap resumed banging around in the chimney. One of the footmen began trying to persuade him into a different room. Soap used all his wiry strength and stubbornness to protest.

Meanwhile, the rest of the household staff still chased Bumbersnoot. The mechanimal had taken refuge under a sofa and was resisting extraction by feather duster. Eventually, he singed the duster into obscurity, the room redolent with the smell of burned feathers. Sophronia gave a casual little whistle. He reemerged, upsetting a small marble statue that looked as if it might actually have come from ancient Rome, and headed toward Sophronia. He was diverted by a footman diving for him.

The mechanimal was steaming and hooting in excitement, and his little mechanical tail was going back and forth with great rapidity. Sophronia had never seen it move so quickly, which reminded her of something Vieve had said. *When his tail starts to wag as fast as a hummingbird's wings.…*

Oh, dear, thought Sophronia. Madame Spetuna must have been running him practically everywhere over the last few days. Either that or Vieve's calculations were terribly off.

The dog's tail became a blur. *Ticktockticktock.*

She looked at Sidheag. "I think it's time we left."

Sidheag reached down and grabbed Pillover and Dimity up by the arms. Together the three of them backed toward Soap and the mound of chimney-cleaning tools.

The footman grabbed Bumbersnoot. Bumbersnoot spat out a spiderlike object that was awfully familiar looking. It landed at the footman's feet, hissing ominously.

How much time had Vieve said they would have once the explosive was launched? Only a few minutes.

Soap tackled the footman, trying to wrestle Bumbersnoot away. The two fell and landed on top of the explosive spider. They rolled to one side, still very close.

Sophronia did the only thing she could think of. She tumbled forward in one of Lady Linette's rolls, grabbed the explosive, and hurled it at the queen

of the Westminster Hive.

At the same time, Sidheag threw all of Soap's coal and equipment up into the air.

Soap whacked the footman upside the head with his coal scuttle, grabbed Bumbersnoot out of his grasp, and stood.

The spider exploded at the countess's feet. The room became nothing but steam, smoke, and coal dust.

By the time the chaos had cleared, the two dandies, the chimney sweep, the mechanimal, and both Plumleigh-Teignmott children had disappeared.

They had to move incredibly fast; vampires were much quicker than they could ever hope to be. Such vampires as these would be startled only for a moment. Sophronia was banking on them focusing on their queen and then getting caught up in the group of Picklemen and their own drones before they could give chase. She was also hoping Madame Spetuna might do something to help delay the enemy.

Sophronia's group burst out the front door of the hive house and ran down the street pell-mell. Dimity brought up the rear, as she was overburdened with a fluffy ball gown and a recent faint.

Captain Niall, still a wolf, bounded toward them. His attached top hat tilted coquettishly.

"Please, get Dimity and Pillover to safety," said Sophronia to the werewolf. "Sidheag, you, too. No point in all of us getting into trouble."

Without protest, the three climbed up onto Captain Niall's furry back. Behind them, a host of people poured forth from the hive, the likes of which had never been seen in the neighborhood before. The group included Picklemen, disheveled and covered in soot; Madame Spetuna, who seemed to be doing her best to trip everyone up; the Duke of Hematol, a vampire without hat or jacket; and a goodly collection of frantic drones. The queen herself, of course, could not leave the hive.

Captain Niall should have sprung away at that juncture, but he did not. He growled at Sophronia and Soap, who stood alone on the pavement. Soap clutched Bumbersnoot in his arms.

Sidheag explained the werewolf's behavior. "He won't leave anyone

behind. It’s not the military way.”

“We don’t fit!” protested Sophronia.

“I’ve an idea,” said Dimity, hopping back off and pulling down her petticoat right there in a public street. *She’s come a long way, has Dimity*, thought Sophronia proudly.

Dimity handed the stiff horsehair garment to Sophronia. “Use this as a sling.” She climbed back on.

With a shrug, Sophronia and Soap sat down in the street on top of the skirt. Embarrassed by her own temerity, Sophronia curled about her tall friend, Bumbersnoot between them, wrapping up in the big purple petticoat like a cocoon.

Soap said, “I’ll get you all over with soot, miss,” clearly mortified by such intimacy.

“That’s all right, Soap. It’s Preshea’s jacket and Sidheag’s clothes.”

Captain Niall gathered up the edges in his teeth and levered. They were only a hairbreadth above the ground, but it was enough.

Thus burdened, the werewolf leapt away, looking more ridiculous than he ever had or ever would again in all his long life.

Duke Hematol, being a vampire, might have caught up to them. But fair sportsmanship must be considered. Technically, they had gotten away, right and proper. Plus, the duke was not the kind of man to go running after anyone through the streets of London without his coat and hat. Lord Ambrose might have followed, but he was still at Monique’s ball. If Hematol had given chase, Captain Niall would have been required to fight him, and that would have been far too messy. Why involve the werewolves in such a shameful business? It was, in the end, impolite to borrow another man’s children. So the Duke of Hematol returned to his queen empty-handed.

Consequently, the overburdened werewolf attained the safety of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s without incident. His passengers tumbled off his back, or out of the petticoat sling, and then climbed up the rope ladder with a collective sense of giddy freedom.

“I canna believe that worked,” said Sidheag, her Scottish accent

broadened by shock.

“Do you two have any idea how ridiculous you look?” said Dimity, still appalled by the dandy outfits.

“That was jolly,” said Soap, grinning widely and hoisting Dimity’s purple petticoat over one shoulder.

Vieve was waiting for them. “What happened? Tell me all!”

“Well,” said Dimity, “where to start? I was held hostage by a vampire queen!” She and Pillover and Sidheag all began talking at once and on top of one another, detailing the events of the last few hours.

Sophronia stood silent, clutching her mechanimal reflexively to her breast.

Soap shuffled over to her. “Are you well, miss?”

Sophronia was embarrassed to find herself shaking.

“Oh, now, miss.” Soap put his arm about her, awkwardly patting her back. As if she hadn’t just spent a sling ride wrapped about him like a streetside doxy. “There, there.”

Sophronia turned her attention on Bumbersnoot. She was enjoying Soap’s comforting embrace too much for her own peace of mind. She’d liked it in the sling, too. He did have very nice muscles. And he smelled good under all that soot. To distract herself, she mock chided the mechanimal. “Bumbersnoot, you horrible creature! Premature exploding is not done!”

Tick-tock, tick-tock went Bumbersnoot’s tail, back to normal speed.

“Oh, now, miss, he did his best,” Soap joined in.

“Thank you for rescuing him, by the way.”

“Thank him with a kiss,” suggested Sidheag, coming over. She had left the storytelling to Dimity and Pillover and was watching Sophronia and Soap through narrowed yellow eyes.

Sophronia tried to back out of Soap’s embrace, but his arm tightened. She looked up in confusion. His laughing brown eyes were unusually serious.

“Go on,” encouraged Sidheag.

Sophronia stood up on tiptoe, intending to peck him on the cheek.

Soap leaned in, grabbing her chin gently, and kissed her. A proper kiss, on the lips.

Sophronia blinked and sputtered. His lips were very soft.

Sidheag said, “Excellent.”

“Good night, miss,” said Soap, and before Sophronia could recover her faculties, he wisely scampered off. This left Sophronia with one hand pressed to tingling lips and no plan, for once in her life.

Eventually, she recovered and glared at Sidheag. “Why do you encourage him? You know it’s not possible.”

“What’s not possible?”

“A sootie and an Uptop.”

“Now, Sophronia, don’t be snobbish.”

Sophronia sighed. “He’s a good friend, Sidheag. I don’t want to ruin that. I don’t think of him in that way.”

“Are you certain?”

“You’re as bad as he is.”

“Perhaps I too have designs above my station.”

Which was a terribly enigmatic thing for Sidheag to say. After all, she was the Lady of Kingair, wealthy and aristocratic. Very few were above her station.

Dimity came bouncing over. “My goodness, what an exciting evening. Do you think we still have time to catch the last of Monique’s ball?”

“Oh, Dimity, really!” said Sophronia and Sidheag in unison.

Monique de Pelouse never returned to Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. Her coming-out ball was pronounced a resounding success by those who cared to pronounce such things, and she took her place in society that spring. She was expected to make a very advantageous match, although there was a niggling rumor about her preference for Westminster vampires. No suitors gave it much credence.

Sidheag and Agatha were taken off probation. No explanation was given, and Sophronia was left with the distinct sensation that they had been less circumspect about the monitoring of Monique than they originally thought. She suspected that Monique's working for Westminster and the potentate's blatant refusal to believe that the hive was involved was considered embarrassing by the school. Sister Mattie probably argued in their favor. Sophronia also understood what lesson she was to have learned from her ostracism. *My strength as an intelligencer is in my friends*. But she wasn't certain whether she was to take that as a need for more independence or less.

She tried several times to visit Professor Braithwope but was forbidden entry. "Enough" was Professor Lefoux's curt comment the fifth time. Sophronia tried to pass along a homemade card and even snuck onto Sister Mattie's balcony to pick him a bunch of foxgloves, but no contact was

allowed. She wasn't certain if this was because he was now insane and dangerous to her or if the teachers had some inkling of her involvement with Shrimpdittle and figured she was dangerous to him. Lessons were dull without his inquisitive mustache. She developed an odd sensation behind her eyeballs, like the press of tears, but no tears came. The burn of guilt, she supposed. Something new and unpleasant to learn to live with. She plucked at her meals and began to think much longer and harder about consequences as well as actions.

Genevieve Lefoux disappeared from Mademoiselle Geraldine's before the airship reached Dartmoor. Professor Lefoux was entirely untroubled by her niece's absence and began to receive letters, a few months later, from a previously unheard-of nephew, Gaspar Lefoux, who had been accepted into Bunson's.

"Distant relation, you know. I had no idea he had evil-genius ambitions. Of course, I am delighted he has found himself a place. Who wouldn't be?" Sophronia overheard her say to Sister Mattie.

"Well, Bunson's is in bed with the Picklemen," protested the nun. "Even more so now. They won the contract to produce the crystalline guidance valves, did you hear? The potentate is introducing legislation in opposition, but it won't pass."

"That is a worry. Well, my nephew knows his own mind. He'll keep to the proper order."

"You'd better be careful, or the Octopus will have him," replied Sister Mattie.

Sophronia wondered if Vieve might be doing a little spying for her aunt while she acquired an education. *It'd be a good thing, a scout at Bunson's*. Her musings were interrupted.

"Sophronia, get a move on, please. We're late for breakfast!"

"Oh, yes, Dimity, of course."

"Post is in, did you hear?" Dimity bustled up alongside her and took her arm.

"Mmmmm?"

They rounded the corner to the great dining hall. Everything was back to normal; the girls were all seated at their various tables, looking neat and tidy and ready for lessons. London and all its charms were now far behind them.

Sophronia and Dimity made their way to their table. Like Monique, several of the older girls had been left behind in London, off to find husbands. Their beaux were carefully selected, their instructions clear, and their new lives as intelligencers begun. And two new debuts sat wide-eyed at their dining table, staring with awe at Preshea. Preshea who, like some evil monster of Greek mythology, had sprung fully formed into Monique's shoes. Literally, as she'd been gifted with the older girl's peach kid boots.

Dimity took her customary seat. "Oh, look, Sophronia, you've got letters. How exciting! Who from?"

Sophronia opened the first one. "Goodness gracious, Felix Mersey."

"Oh, what does he say? Is it a declaration?"

Sophronia considered the brief but pleasant paragraph. "No. Compliments and excessively charming inquiries. But blessedly there's no mention of me dressing as a dandy."

"A courting letter! How exciting."

"Mmm. You know, I think he thinks I favor the Picklemen now. Vampires, after all, kidnapped you."

"Well, don't we? It wasn't exactly comfortable for me." Dimity had a gift for understatement. "And they did kill that poor girl." She shuddered with remembered horror.

Sophronia put a hand on her friend's arm in sympathy. "I'm more in favor than I was, but why did the hive risk so much to stop them? There's something more afoot."

"Will you ever stop seeing conspiracies?"

"When others stop concocting them, I suppose."

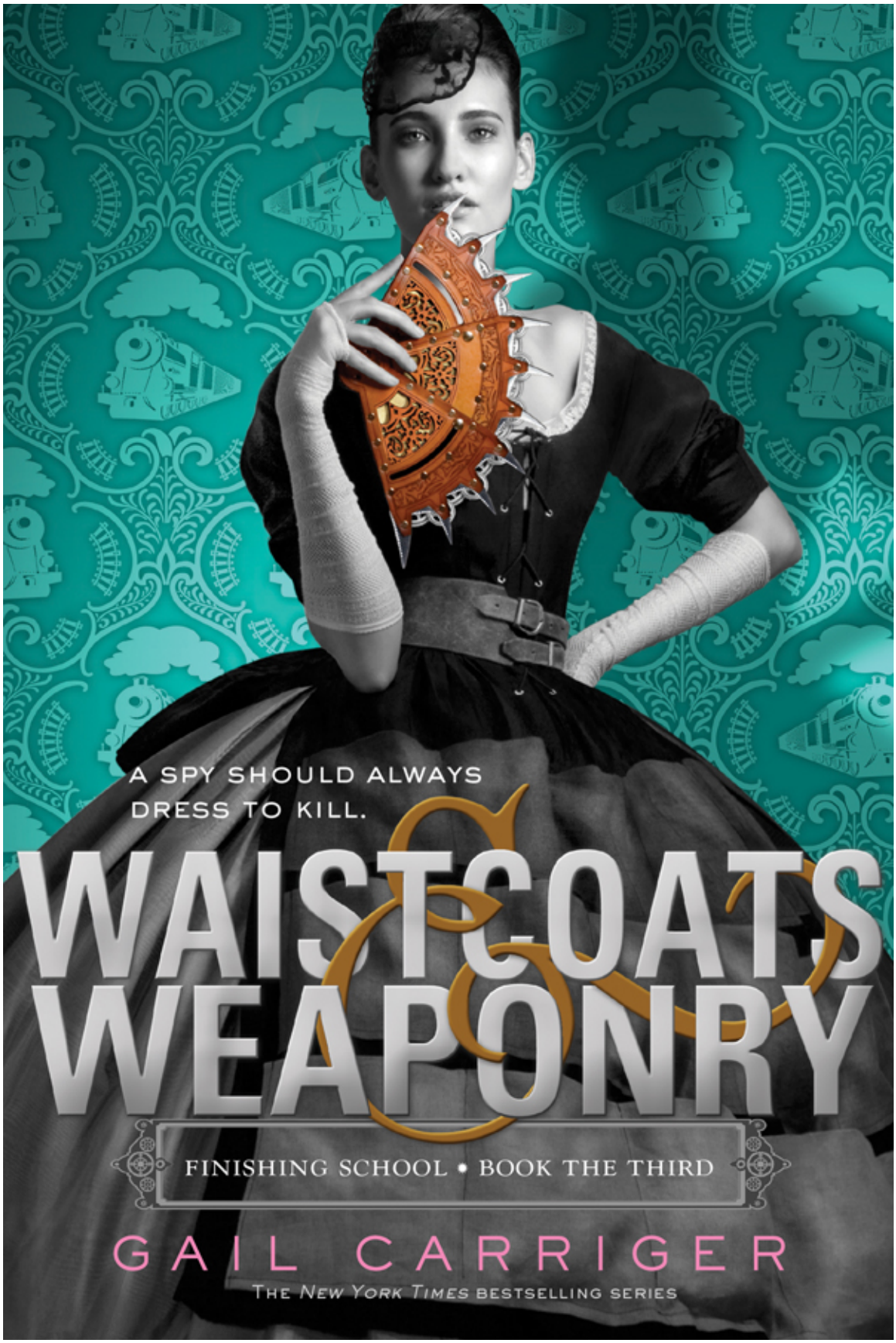
Dimity sighed. "So it goes. Now, what's in the other letter?"

This one was even shorter than the first, a few flowery lines and an elegant signature. "Lord Akeldama pays his respects. Well, gracious me."

Dimity was confused. "Who's he? Is he also courting you?"

"In a way, I think he may be." Sophronia gave the letter to Bumbersnoot to burn. Safer that way.

The End


A SPY SHOULD ALWAYS
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FINISHING SCHOOL ✹ BOOK THE THIRD

GAIL CARRIGER

Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston

For Rhonda:
She glittered.

Beware Vampires Wearing Flowerpots

"Funambulist," said Sophronia Temminnick, quite suddenly.

"Sophronia, such language!" Dimity Plumleigh-Teignmott reprimanded.

"Pardon?" said Agatha Woosmoss.

Sidheag Maccon, the final member of Sophronia's group, muttered, "Bless you."

"I wasn't sneezing, nor being indelicate, thank you all very much. I was thinking out loud."

"As if thinking out loud weren't *decidedly* indelicate." Dimity was not to be swayed out of disapproval when she felt it might exercise her creativity.

"*Funambulist*. Do you think that's what Professor Braithwope was, you know, *professionally*, before he became a vampire? A tightrope walker in a carnival?"

"I suppose it's possible," said Dimity, mollified.

With which, the four girls all returned to staring over the railing of the squeak deck. They were, theoretically, in class with some ten fellow students and Professor Braithwope. It was their vampire teacher's custom of late to administer decidedly oddball lessons. Which is to say, more oddball than an ordinary lesson with a vampire in a floating dirigible espionage school.

It was a drizzly January evening, 1853, the sun recently set, and Professor Braithwope was currently twirling back and forth along the thin plank that stretched from the forward-most squeak deck's railing to the pilot's bubble. He was leagues up in the air.

Sophronia had watched the professor run that particular plank with deadly grace the very first day she came aboard Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. She'd never anticipated watching him *dance* along it. Admittedly, he danced with no less grace than he ran, performing some sedate quadrille with an imaginary partner. However, he was doing so while balancing a flowerpot on his head, one that contained Sister Mattie's prize foxglove. Before his troubles, Professor Braithwope would never leave his room without a top hat occupying that sacred spot on his glossy brown coiffure. But for months his behavior had become increasingly erratic; witness the fact that he also wore an old-fashioned black satin cape with a high collar and scarlet lining. His fangs were extended, causing him to lisp slightly, and he punctuated his quadrille with a maniacal laugh that, if inscribed for posterity, might have been written as "Mua ha ha."

"Should one of us go after him?" Sophronia worried that he would fall to his doom. Plummeting to the moor would snap his tether to the dirigible, and it was tether-snap that had caused his madness in the first place.

"Why?" Preshea turned to her. "Are you some kind of tightrope walker yourself?"

Since the Dratted Monique had matriculated on to a new life as drone to Westminster vampire hive, Miss Preshea Buss had taken over all residual nastiness. She netted herself a group of stylish associates from among the new debuts, too young to know better.

Sophronia ignored Preshea and looked at Dimity. "What do you think?"

Professor Braithwope pirouetted. Far below, the wet grasses and prickly gorse slid by, partly visible through the mist.

"Perhaps someone should go for matron?" suggested Dimity.

"Or Lady Linette?" said Agatha.

"Is it all that different from any of our other lessons with the idiot?" asked Preshea. She and the rest of the class enjoyed the fact that their hours spent with Professor Braithwope had turned into a free-for-all with little guidance or actual work.

"He's not usually this bad." Sophronia didn't wish to be thought a goody-goody, especially not at a school of espionage, but she wanted their old mercurial professor back: the one who taught them to manipulate vampire politics; to use fashion to confuse and kill; to interact with

government, high society, and curling tongs. This new vampire was bonkers, in a flowerpot-wearing way, and not at all useful. She understood why the school kept him on. Since he was tethered here, he must stay on board and couldn't be retired groundside. So far, he didn't *seem* dangerous to anyone but himself, but it was difficult to forget that he was a crazy immortal and they all were, in the end, food.

Sophronia's green eyes narrowed. Perhaps he was being used as a new kind of lesson: how to deal with a risky vampire in a powerful position.

Professor Braithwope whirled to face the sea of staring faces: a dozen bright, pretty young ladies, confused, amused, and concerned by his quadrille. "Ah, class! There you are, whot. Now remember, no matter how high, there is always time for frivolity or politics, whot?"

Sophronia perked up. Were they about to *learn* something?

"Speech," encouraged Preshea.

"We are all Queen Victoria's subjects, vampire or werewolf. We owe her allegiance. Only in England do we have a voice, a vote, and a snack. We help build the Empire, we keep our noble island strong."

Sophronia frowned. This was not new information. This was simply the progressive party stance.

"We have been members since King Henry's day. Or should I say night? My, but he was *fat.* And no pickle should relish that sandwich!" He finished there, arms wide.

The young ladies all clapped politely.

"Now, who would like to dance? One of you must be willing to trip the light mahogany? Miss Temminnick? You would not deny me a dance, whot?"

Sophronia adjusted her skirts. This might be the only way to get him back onto the squeak deck.

"Now, Sophronia," warned Dimity, "don't do anything hasty." She was one of the few who knew that Sophronia felt guilty over their teacher's insane condition.

Sophronia levered herself onto the railing and from there, the plank. It was just as narrow and as slippery as she expected. Her wide, heavy dress—held out with multiple petticoats—acted as ballast. She inched toward the vampire, not looking down.

At one point she slipped slightly and wobbled, arms pinwheeling.

Behind her, all the gathered young ladies gasped.

Dimity let out a small shriek.

Sophronia heard Agatha say, “I can’t watch. Tell me when it’s over.”

“Sophronia!” said Preshea. “Come back here this instant. What are you doing? What if you fall? Can you imagine the scandal? This is ridiculous. Agatha, go fetch Lady Linette. Sophronia’s going to get all of us into trouble. Really, Sophronia, why must you always spoil everyone’s fun?”

Sophronia moved closer to Professor Braithwope.

“Ah, Miss Temminnick, how kind of you to join me. Would you care to dance?”

“No, thank you, Professor.” She struggled to guide his fantasy back to safety. “But perhaps you could fetch me a little punch? I’m parched.”

“Punch is it, whot?” The vampire tapped her lightly on the chin with his closed fist. “Mua ha ha! Aren’t I droll? Of course, my dear girl, of course. But would you like blood punch or brain punch?” He paused, shook his head, and then said in a small voice, “Oh, wait, where… Miss Temminnick! What are you doing here? Whot whot?”

“You invited me, sir.”

“I did? Why would I do that? What are you doing at a Buckingham Palace supernatural reception? You aren’t even out yet. Plus, I’m tolerably certain you aren’t a supernatural. You aren’t high enough rank, either. Although I suppose we are both tolerably high up, whot.”

“You were going to fetch me some punch, sir?”

“Was I?” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I don’t think Queen Victoria likes punch. In fact, I know she doesn’t. Would a glass of resin do? For the wood. A nice sealant. Necessary in weather like this. They’re collecting crystals, did you know? Pretty round ones, crystals to rule the world. Then there are mechanicals to think about. I don’t trust them, do you? No, exactly! Not with punch, at any rate.”

Sophronia remembered Westminster Hive. “Do any vampires trust mechanicals?”

“No. Nor do our brother werewolves. Why should they, whot? I mean to say, why should we? I am a vampire, am I not?”

“Yes, Professor, have been for hundreds of years.”

“That long? Miss Temminnick, you should come with me.” With that, Professor Braithwope picked Sophronia up bodily under one arm and

carried her *away* from the squeak deck toward the pilot's bubble, mincing along the plank.

The pilot's bubble was the size of two very large bathtubs, one overturned on top of the other. It was supported from below by scaffolding but was otherwise far from the safety of the airship.

Professor Braithwope set her down on top of the bubble on a flat area big enough for two.

"Now what, sir?" Sophronia asked politely.

"Miss Temminnick, what are you doing on top of the pilot's bubble?"

"You just put me here, sir."

"Oh, yes. Now, would you like to dance?"

"If you insist. There doesn't seem to be a great deal of space."

"It is quite the rout, whot? I've never known Buckingham to be so crowded. Usually, the queen is more selective. Why, I believe there are even clavigers present. I mean, drones are one thing, but clavigers are little more than prison wardens! Not to worry, little bite, I'll do most of the work." He began a gentle waltz on top of the bubble. He was inhumanly strong and unbelievably well balanced. Sophronia trusted in his ability to hold her up and hoped he wouldn't suddenly forget about her, or think she was a hat and try to wear her instead of the flowerpot.

"Professor Braithwope, really!" came an autocratic voice from the squeak deck.

Agatha had returned with Lady Linette.

"Put Miss Temminnick down and come back here this instant. Shameful behavior, sir."

The vampire looked like a crestfallen schoolboy and stopped waltzing. Mademoiselle Geraldine was the official headmistress, but everyone knew Lady Linette held the real power. Accordingly, the vampire let Sophronia go, turned, and dashed back along the beam.

Sophronia slipped on the bubble roof. Her feet went out from under her, and she slid over the side. Her petticoats bunched and snagged on a loose nail, but not enough to do more than slow her fall.

Several of the watching young ladies screamed in horror.

Fortunately, Sophronia was accustomed to gallivanting about the hull of the ship. Her instincts kicked in. Instead of grappling for purchase, she reached one hand over to the opposite wrist. Pointing that wrist up, she

ejected her hurlie. The hurlie looked a bit like a turtle one wore as a bracelet, but when it was deployed, two grappling hooks sprang out from underneath. The hurlie arced up and over the bubble, taking hold on the other side. It trailed a rope, so Sophronia fell only that distance before her left arm was fairly jerked out of its socket. She got her right hand around the rope to relieve the strain and found herself dangling like a fish at the end of a line.

“Miss Temminnick,” she heard Lady Linette cry, “report your condition.”

“Sophronia,” shrieked Dimity, “are you all right? Oh, dear, oh, dear.”

Shocked and winded, Sophronia needed a moment before she could answer either.

“Professor Braithwope, go after her!” Lady Linette ordered.

“Dear madam,” protested the vampire, “must protect the other young ladies from an equally dire fate.” With which there came the sound of splintering wood.

Sophronia twirled sedately at the end of her rope, eventually able to witness the vampire destroying his former dancing beam with his bare hands.

“Professor, stop that immediately!” instructed Lady Linette.

“Sophronia, are you well? Oh, please answer.” Dimity again.

Sophronia mustered enough breath to yell back, “I’m perfectly fine. However, it appears I am now stranded.” She couldn’t see any way to climb up to the deck or down along the bubble’s scaffolding to return to the ship. Fortunately, the pilot’s bubble remained in place, although it did sway a bit more without the added stabilization of the beam.

“Miss Temminnick,” said Lady Linette. “Where did you get that ingenious hook thing?”

“A friend,” replied Sophronia.

“Unregistered gadgetry is not allowed on school grounds, young lady. Although I find myself pleased you had this particular one to hand. Or to wrist, I should say.”

Sophronia, still spinning serenely through space, replied with, “I do apologize, Lady Linette, but might we discuss this later? Perhaps now we should solve my immediate predicament?”

“Of course, dear,” yelled her teacher, and then, distracted, “No,

Professor Braithwope, not the soldier mechanicals. Bad vampire!”

“Lady Linette?” hollered Sophronia, feeling neglected.

“Yes, dear. If you could climb up to the underside of the pilot’s bubble? You’ll find a hatch to get inside just there. We’ll use capsule pipeline eggs to communicate with you once you’re safe. I’ll send Professor Lefoux. She’s better at these sorts of engineering difficulties.”

How, wondered Sophronia, *is my dangling off the bubble an engineering difficulty?* She said, “Very good, thank you.”

She spun around enough to see back up to the squeak deck, in time to witness Lady Linette dash after the mincing Professor Braithwope. “Now, now, Professor, please!” He was still wearing his potted plant.

She saw Sister Mattie’s round, drab form appear and heard that teacher say, “My dears, have you seen my prize foxglove? Oh, no, Professor, really? I spent weeks on that one!” She bounced up and down, attempting to extract the plant from Professor Braithwope’s head.

The assembled young ladies, with the exception of Dimity, Agatha, and Sidheag, found the spectacle of Sophronia dangling no longer to their taste and turned to follow the hijinks of their teachers.

“Sophronia,” came Dimity’s voice, “will you be all right?” Her face was wrinkled with genuine worry.

“Can we help in any way?” Agatha wanted to know. She, too, worried, but was less aggressive about it.

“Want some company?” said Sidheag. She rarely worried about anything and had complete confidence in Sophronia’s ability to extract herself from any predicament.

“Oh, dear me, no,” replied Sophronia, as if she had a mild case of the sniffles and they had called ’round to inquire after her health. “Thank you for your concern, but don’t linger on my account.”

“Well…” Dimity was hesitant. “If you’re certain?”

“I’ll see you at tea,” said Sophronia, sounding more confident than she felt.

“Either that or we shall come back up here in an hour and toss crumpets to you.”

“Oh, how thoughtful, tossed crumpets. Thank you, Sidheag.”

“Can’t have you starving as you dangle.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Bye for now.” Agatha turned reluctantly away.

Dimity said, lingering, “Are you *quite* certain?”

“Quite.”

“Carry on, then, Sophronia,” said Sidheag with a grin, before marching off. Her tall, bony form somehow transmitted sarcastic humor even across all the empty space that separated them.

Sophronia was left suspended and alone.

Despite her wrenched shoulder, Sophronia managed to climb up the rope hand over hand—she had indecently large arm muscles for a young lady of quality. By dint of some fancy footwork and the tension from her hurlie, she wiggled around the outside of the bubble to the hatch. It was difficult to open, as if it had not been used in a long time. It was also narrow. Her skirts were so wide she stoppered up the opening like a wine cork. She had to ease herself back out and shed two petticoats, utilizing a one-handed unlacing technique. They fluttered to the moor, doomed to cause confusion to a small herd of shaggy ponies that roamed there. She was resigned to the loss. Espionage, Sophronia had learned, was tough on petticoats. After that she squeezed through, finding herself, with a good deal of relief, inside the pilot’s bubble.

Sophronia didn’t know what she’d expected. Some wizened man who spent his days cooped up in a bathtub? But the bubble was not designed for human occupation at all.

The front had three small portholes, through which, on a rare clear day, all of Dartmoor would be laid out like a tablecloth. Tonight the view was nothing but dark drizzle.

The whole forward half of the bubble was filled with engorged mechanical. Had it been human, it would have been one of those gentlemen who partook too freely of the pudding course and too little of daily exercise. Most mechanicals were human sized and mimicked the shape of a lady’s dress—which is to say smaller on the top, wider on the bottom. Or perhaps it was ladies’ fashion that imitated the shape of mechanicals? Skirts were getting so ridiculously wide, one was hard pressed to walk down a hallway without knocking things over. Mechanicals were more reasonably sized… except this one. This one could give Preshea in her most fashionable ball

gown stiff competition. Its lower extremities formed a pile of machinery, not hidden under a respectable carapace but exposed and horribly functional. Perched on top of this was a normal mechanical brain, facing forward. It boasted multiple arms, like a spider. Occasionally, it reached out one clawlike appendage and pulled a lever or twiddled a switch.

“Pardon me for introducing myself, Mr. Mechanical. I’m Miss Temminnick. Are you equipped with verbal protocols?”

The pilot ignored her. Perhaps it did not have the ability to see that a wayward student had climbed into its domain. Lacking options, Sophronia explored. There wasn’t much: a few ropes, a cornucopia of tools, and that squatting mechanical. She brushed off her skirts and sat down atop a tall leather hatbox thing. She ran an assessment of her physical condition, finding herself basically unharmed, simply sore. She considered how to retrieve her grappling hook, still embedded on the outside of the bubble. Her only option might be to climb back out, using one of the ropes as a safety line.

A whooshing noise interrupted her thoughts. An egg-shaped pod spat out of a tube and skidded along a specially designed trough. One of the mechanical’s arms came crashing down and cracked the egg open.

Sophronia jumped and squeaked at the suddenness of it.

The mechanical reached out with yet another of its appendages and unrolled the paper within. The paper was perforated with small holes of variable location. This the mechanical rested on a reader that looked like the voice coil of a standard mechanical—music box technology.

Another arm turned a crank and the paper fed through. Sophronia supposed this would normally issue a set of protocols to the mechanical on how to pilot the ship, but in this case it caused the tinny voice of an underused vocal-quadringer to read instructions.

“Rope ladder stashed below Pirandellope Probe, near feeding tube for capsule pipeline.”

Sophronia knew the instructions were for her. Somehow, even though the sound was mechanized and lacked emphasis, the message conveyed Professor Lefoux’s special brand of French disinterest.

On Fans and Flirting

"That's it?" Sidheag was disappointed in Sophronia's desultory description of the pilot's bubble.

"When did you get interested in technology?" replied Sophronia.

"It's not that; I was hoping that after we left, you would fall to your doom. Something exciting for once."

"Thank you kindly, Lady Kingair. The fact that I was initially dropped overboard by a vampire wasn't exciting enough for you?"

"Not with you, Sophronia, it wasn't." Sidheag passed over the buttered pikelets without having to be asked.

"I spoil you, that's the problem." Sophronia, secretly flattered, deposited a pikelet onto her plate.

Sidheag's masculine face lit up with a grin.

Teatime conversation flowed smoothly among the members of their little band. Over a year and a half's association and Sophronia would have described the other three as *confidantes extraordinaire*. The best part being that she knew they felt the same way about her. Each had her own set of abilities. Sidheag had stoic strength. Dimity a guileless craftiness. Agatha… well, perhaps Agatha was a bit of a wet blanket. She was loyal to a fault and she did try. She tried too hard sometimes.

As if to illustrate this, the chubby redhead looked suddenly panicked and began to pat her person and rifle through her reticule. "What class do we have after tea?" she asked, voice wobbling.

Dimity looked up from applying strawberry jam to her pikelet. "Captain

Niall. It's Thursday, we always have him on Thursdays, unless the moon is full. Really, Agatha dear, how could you forget? It's *Captain Niall*!"

Agatha was relieved. "Oh, that's all right. Unless… we weren't meant to bring anything, were we? Scissors, or paperweights, or wheat paste, or…?"

"No," Sidheag answered. She was *always* prepared for Captain Niall's classes. They were her favorite, and not only because he was a proper bit of sweetmeat. Sidheag liked weapons training. She was Scottish, after all. "We're moving on from deadly library supplies to something else this evening. He didn't say what." She tugged on her earlobe, uncomfortable. Sophronia wasn't certain if that was because she didn't know what was going on or because of Captain Niall. Sophronia suspected Sidheag of harboring a good deal of romantic interest in their werewolf professor. Of course, half the young ladies of Mademoiselle Geraldine's tendered feelings in his direction. Captain Niall was quite dashing. Sidheag, either because she was embarrassed to acknowledge any emotion or because she was disgusted with herself for belonging to a popular movement, had yet to confess said interest.

Sophronia, as a result, rather enjoyed teasing her on the subject. "Didn't say? Not even to you? But I thought you two were so close."

Sidheag walked right into her trap. "Not that close! He doesn't share lesson plans with me."

"Well, then, does he share something else?"

Dimity was feeling equally mischievous. "Dead rabbits, perhaps? Laying his kill at your feet."

"What?" Sidheag was genuinely confused.

Dimity was not to be turned aside. "As if we didn't see you nuzzling up to the lovely captain regularly."

Sidheag objected to this unwarranted accusation. "Nuzzling! He's ten times my age!"

Dimity waved an airy hand. "Immortals usually are, and he certainly still cuts a fine figure."

Sophronia nudged Sidheag's shoulder. "And you know werewolves. I mean to say, *you* know them." They so rarely got to rib Sidheag.

The Scottish girl actually blushed.

Mindful of her chamber-mate's finer feelings, Agatha returned them to the subject of preparing for class. "Well, thank goodness it's him. I was sure

we had Lady Linette, and I've misplaced my chewing tobacco for card rooms and informant recruiting."

"Again? Really, Agatha." Sidheag was unsympathetic.

"To be fair, yesterday it was the lip tint. If you only kept your side of the room cleaner."

"You can't blame me for your absentmindedness."

"Yes, I can." Agatha only really had any gumption with Sidheag. Which was funny, because Sidheag was so gruff and Agatha so timid. But after months of their living together, Agatha had learned to stick up for herself. Sidheag was a big softy underneath her grumbling. It came, they all suspected, from being raised by werewolves. As Dimity said, "Sidheag surely does grumpy old man very well for a sixteen-year-old girl."

"Are you four going to sit there gossiping all night?" Preshea was standing above them, looking down her nose. A rare opportunity for the girl, as she was quite short.

The dining room was empty. Somehow, they had missed the mass exodus. The maid mechanicals were beginning to clear the tea tables.

"Oh, I see, you're waiting to gather up the extra pikelets, so Agatha can have a snack later." Preshea had a very clipped way of talking, as though each word were murdered just after being spoken.

At the dig over her portly frame, Agatha teared up.

Dimity gasped and put her hand to her lips.

Sophronia was so perturbed by the direct nature of the attack that she lacked a ready rebuttal.

Sidheag, on the other hand, simply threw her mostly uneaten pikelet at Preshea.

"Lady Kingair," said Preshea, shocked, "this is a new gown!"

"Well, you shouldn't go around being nasty when the rest of us are armed with nibbly bits, should you?" Sidheag was unperturbed by the smear of jam that now decorated Preshea's décolletage.

Preshea flounced off, still in possession of verbal superiority. After all, they ought to have responded with wit, not flying pancakes. But Agatha looked cheered by Sidheag's pikelet defense.

Dimity sniffed. "That girl is like walking, talking indigestion. Sophronia, can't we *do* something about her?"

Sophronia frowned. "I don't know if it's worth the risk. They've been

watching me closely since the Westminster Hive incident."

"Please?" Dimity gave her big hazel-eyed look of appeal.

"I'll think about it. Now come on; we're late, and the staircase won't wait."

They abandoned the last of the pikelets uneaten and trooped down after the rest of the students toward the midship deck. Before they could catch the other young ladies, however, they were waylaid.

"Lady Kingair, a moment of your time, please?"

Professor Lefoux was the most fearsome teacher at the school. Her subjects included deadly gadgetry, high-impact weaponry, and infiltrating academia. Even Sophronia was equal parts terrified and impressed by her visage, attitude, and abilities. However, she was not the type of teacher to accost one in the hallways, nor intercept a student when she was already late for class.

Sidheag, controlling her surprise, faced the austere lady. They were almost of a height. Professor Lefoux was the only person at the school next to whom Sidheag's governess-like attire seemed soft and approachable.

The professor, Sophronia always felt, looked as if she had been sticking her head out the side of a very fast carriage. All her hair was pulled back from her unlined face, making her seem stretched.

"Yes, Professor, how may I help you?" Even Sidheag knew when to be polite.

"You have received"—Professor Lefoux paused, distressed, if such a thing were to be thought possible—"a *pigeon*."

The girls gasped. Pigeons were for emergency use only.

Sidheag blanched. "Has someone died? Is it Gramps? Has he been challenged?"

Professor Lefoux glanced at the other three girls, who nudged up to their friend sympathetically. "It is a private matter. This way, please. *Alone*, young lady." She turned and strode down the hallway, expecting Sidheag to follow.

Dimity gave the taller girl's arm a reassuring squeeze. "Good luck."

The three watched until Sidheag was out of sight 'round a bend in the passageway.

"What do you think could possibly require such extreme measures?" wondered Dimity.

Agatha and Sophronia looked at each other.

"Problems with the pack," said Sophronia, "has to be. Only a crisis in the supernatural community warrants *the pigeon*."

Agatha nodded, upset. They all knew how devoted Sidheag was to her pack of werewolf uncles. Plus, crises in the supernatural community rarely stayed localized.

They proceeded to their next lesson minus one companion, and a great deal more somber as a result.

Captain Niall's classes took place groundside, on the moor proper. Like all werewolves, he was unable to float. His classes also involved all the students at the school together, some thirty-eight or so, fewer than when Sophronia had first arrived. Many of the older girls had gone out into society, and Mademoiselle Geraldine's hadn't taken on an equivalent number of debuts.

The school sank as far as it safely could, the propeller whirling to steady the airship against the winds, and the staircase folded down. The deployment crank was manned by a couple of sooties up from engineering. One of them—a tall, good-looking young man with ebony skin and a quick white smile—issued Sophronia a private wink. She should, of course, have been shocked by such forwardness from an underling, but Soap was one of Sophronia's best friends and favorite people in the world. So she winked back—when she knew none of the teachers were watching, of course.

Once the staircase settled, partly sunk into the green grasses, the young ladies trooped down.

Captain Niall was waiting for them. Their werewolf teacher was a truly handsome beast, if one overlooked the fact that his top hat was tied neatly under his chin, he wore no shoes, and his carefully buttoned greatcoat did not quite conceal that the rest of him was indecently bare. For some of the young ladies, not overlooking these facts actually increased the man's appeal.

"Good evening, ladies," said Captain Niall in his velvet voice. "And how are we tonight?" The girls chorused polite replies, some of them blushing; the youngest ones—not yet trained in the correct method—curtsied too deeply. Sophronia was pleased to note that her curtsy was

nearly perfect.

“Follow me, if you would?”

Captain Niall led them down the hill to a small creek. He produced a leather case from the depths of his greatcoat. About the size of a lady’s jewelry case, it looked particularly dainty in his large hands. Despite his size, Captain Niall had a harmless, floppy demeanor. Most people forgot that he was, in actuality, a supernatural creature who could decapitate the average ruffian as easily as peeling an orange, and probably faster.

“Now, on to this month’s weapon.”

What weapon is so tiny thirty-eight of them fit into such a small case? Sophronia wondered.

With a flourish, the werewolf flipped the lid, displaying the contents. The case was full of fans—clunky and not very pretty fans, at that.

“Ladies, please form a queue. One each.”

The girls lined up by age and each received a fan. Sophronia was startled by how heavy hers was. Close examination showed that the fan’s leaves were fabric but its ribs and guards were metal, the tips razor sharp. *A fan that is also a weapon, ingenious!*

Captain Niall began to demonstrate movements. Many of the techniques were similar to those of the letter opener, in whose deadly application they’d already received much instruction. He expanded on their existing repertoire, with butterfly-like movements. There were sharp, quick slashes designed to surprise. There was no stabbing with the fan; the idea was to disarm and disable, not kill. It was amusing to see a werewolf waving a fan about like some imitation of an exotic dancer in the music halls.

The girls practiced with leather guards over their fans, for safety. This also kept Dimity from fainting. Over a year and a half of training to be an intelligencer and Dimity still fainted at the sight of blood. Poor thing, she wasn’t meant for this lifestyle.

Sophronia adored the bladed fan the moment she took it through the first pass. As a result, she tried extra hard to master the movements. Captain Niall was impressed. After an hour’s work, he summoned her forward.

“Miss Temminnick, Miss Buss? You’re both looking well. How about a small duel?” The teacher’s mellow brown eyes shone with anticipated glee.

Sophronia had never before faced Preshea one-to-one, but she was game. Particularly after Preshea’s dig against Agatha.

Preshea gave her a nasty smile, tucked a stray lock of glossy black hair behind one perfect, shell-like ear, and took up the guard position. Or at least Sophronia assumed it was guard position—hard to tell in skirts. One of the advantages of being a fighting female: legs were, for all practical purposes, invisible.

Their movements were cautious and clumsy at first, nothing like Captain Niall's speedy grace. Preshea mostly attacked and Sophronia mostly defended.

Captain Niall shouted instructions, which Sophronia—at least—tried to obey.

"Miss Temminnick, try the treble clef defense. Miss Buss, the *fleur de lys* attack. Well done! And now, Miss Temminnick, the pirouette. Oh, look, ladies, she's already doing it."

The girls crowded around, fascinated.

Captain Niall switched from instruction to commentary.

"Now Miss Temminnick has taken up the Valkyrie flip. Note the curves of her movements? And a very nice snap of the wrist there from Miss Buss."

Sophronia caught the flicker of the werewolf's hands as he gestured for the other students to collectively do something, but her attention was taken up with Preshea.

The ground beneath her feet became uneven and squishy. Captain Niall was using the crowd to herd the two fighters onto the bank of the stream.

Sophronia had barely a moment to realize this, for several things happened in quick succession.

Preshea stripped the leather guard off her fan. With a yell of triumph she cut in, slicing at Sophronia's unprotected face.

Sophronia reeled, raising her free hand in defense. Her pagoda sleeve fell away, exposing the undersleeve. Preshea's fan sliced easily through the muslin and into the flesh below Sophronia's left elbow. A few of the younger girls shrieked. There was a thump and skirts rustled. Dimity had fainted.

Captain Niall cried halt, but Preshea was out for more blood. A look came into her beautiful eyes that was more common during poison class. Captain Niall would have intervened, but Sophronia met his eyes briefly and shook her head. She did not strip the guard off her own fan, but she did

switch from defense to attack. Also, she began to employ not only the slashing letter-opener technique Captain Niall had taught her but some of the dirty fighting she'd learned from Soap.

She commenced a flurry of quick nips and twists, half-*fleur* attacks designed to alarm but not injure. Preshea was forced to guard, not realizing that Sophronia's real intent was to edge about so that she was uphill from her opponent. Soon Sophronia was pressing Preshea back, closer to the stream.

With her injured arm, Sophronia reached for her chatelaine and the small bottle of perfume dangling there, the one they were instructed to carry at all times. She used to stock rose oil, but an incident during her debut had left her with a marked preference for lemon-infused tinctures in a metal flask with snap-top lid.

With Preshea distracted by the wickedly darting fan, Sophronia poured out a quantity of the perfumed alcohol with, and into, her free hand. Then she flicked the liquid into Preshea's eyes.

The girl squealed and stumbled back, straight into the stream, landing on her bottom with a splash. Her beautiful skirts poufed out around her before sagging as they absorbed the muddy water. The skirts—a rich purple color, in a modern petal cut—looked remarkably like a water lily before they deflated. Afterward, the dress looked more like a wrinkled old prune.

There was a round of giggles and some gloved applause from their fellow students.

Being a true gentleman, Captain Niall went into the stream to offer Preshea a hand up.

"Now, Miss Buss, bloodthirstiness is all well and good, but you ought to have stopped the moment you bloodied Miss Temminnick. First blood always ends a duel."

Preshea pouted prettily and offered no excuse, although she eagerly accepted his assistance.

The werewolf turned to Sophronia. "Miss Temminnick, commendable defense. You are to be applauded for not buckling under the pain. Now let Lady Kingair see to your injury. Lady Kingair?"

Of course, Captain Niall would suppose that Sidheag had knowledge of wounds, being the child of a werewolf pack. But Sidheag was not there.

Captain Niall's boyish face looked older when he frowned. "Where is

Lady Kingair? It's not like her to miss my class. Miss Woosmoss?"

Agatha looked panicked by the direct attention of the teacher.

"Called away by Professor Lefoux," said Sophronia, gritting her teeth at the pain, which, now that she'd stopped running about with a fan, was quite intense. "She had a pigeon."

Captain Niall continued to frown. "*A pigeon?* We shall see about that. Miss Woosmoss, perhaps you would wrap Miss Temminnick's arm? I think you are not the type to faint."

Agatha nodded, colored, and shook her head, trying to respond to both statements without actually saying anything.

"Good girl."

Sophronia, feeling weak, sat down abruptly on the mossy bank, despite the inevitable damage to her own skirts. Oh, well, her dress was probably ruined anyway; blood was near to impossible to get out of silk.

Agatha squeaked and ran over to her.

Rather callously, Captain Niall continued with class. "Ladies! What did we learn from Miss Temminnick's tactics?"

"She used the terrain to her advantage," said one.

"Exactly so, obstacles are not always a detriment. What else?"

"Uh, sir," came a timid voice. "It's Dimity, sir. She's fainted."

Captain Niall, well used to Dimity, since his classes were the ones most likely to produce blood, said only, "Apply the smelling salts to the silly chit, do."

He turned back to Sophronia. "The arm?"

"I'll do," said Sophronia, although the pain was, if possible, more intense under Agatha's ministrations. The redhead had dipped her handkerchief into the creek and was patting clumsily at the gash.

Sophronia realized why the werewolf was keeping his distance and acting so uncaring. She explained in a low voice to Agatha, "He won't come check. My blood probably smells too tasty."

Agatha blanched and looked with wide eyes at their teacher, whose general attitude and demeanor were not significantly different from normal. He was very good at putting on a front. They had learned from Sidheag that this was also a sign of age in werewolves.

Sophronia said to Agatha, "Why not apply some of my lemon tincture? Sister Mattie always says alcohol helps clean cuts, and the lemon scent will

hide the smell of my blood."

Agatha reached for the little bottle hanging from Sophronia's waist. Since she hadn't recapped it during the fight, most of it had sloshed out, but there was enough left to pour over the wound. Agatha then wrapped Sophronia's arm with her handkerchief.

"All good, Captain Niall," said Sophronia as Agatha helped her to stand.

The werewolf sniffed and then raised both eyebrows. "Goodness, I can't even smell… Miss Woosmoss, what did you do?"

Agatha said tremulously, "Sophronia's idea, sir. We used her perfume to clean the wound and modify the scent."

Captain Niall came over. "Remarkable." He turned back to the other girls. "Now, who would like to duel next? Keeping the leather guards on this time, please."

Sophronia retreated up the bank to sit next to Dimity, who was coming 'round.

"What did I miss?" Dimity sat up, patting at her bonnet to check the straw for injury.

"Oh, nothing much, I dumped Preshea in the river." Sophronia gestured to where Preshea stood, bedraggled and shivering in a shawl, surrounded by solicitous girls.

"Oh, bother. That's your best so far."

Sophronia grinned. "You know, I might agree with you there." She looked down at the fan she still held in her good hand. "I believe I may have to get myself one of these. Do you think they are available on Bond Street or will I have to special order?"

"You will have to order several in different colors to match all your outfits," said Dimity with conviction. She was always serious about the fashionable side of matters deadly.

Sophronia groaned. "How will I get Mumsy to outlay? There's Ephraim's engagement ball coming up. She's bound to hold that against me for funding reasons. You've no idea how lucky you are to have only one sibling. Being an intelligencer is rather an expensive undertaking."

Dimity smiled. "How about getting a patron? Lady Linette did just instruct us to start considering our options."

Sophronia grimaced; there were no good options. Everything meant lack of independence. "Quality marriage or patronage."

“You have to pay back the school somehow.”

“I’m not ready to marry yet.”

That, Dimity didn’t understand. “Not even Felix Mersey—rich and handsome?”

Sophronia replied, her tone wistful, “Oh, no, Dimity, you know I couldn’t. Sidheag would never forgive me.”

“Why? Oh, because his father is a Pickleman?”

“Sidheag has a supernatural’s mistrust of Picklemen.”

Dimity said, “I’m not deeply keen on them myself.”

Sophronia arched an eyebrow in agreement.

Dimity sighed. “So no marriage; then what are your plans for patronage after we leave?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it. Lord Akeldama seems nice enough—I’m not sure I want to be a vampire’s drone, though. Do you think he’d take me on under indenture without a feeding plan?”

Dimity returned to the immediate necessity. “Regardless, he wants you, so ask him for a fan.”

“What a shocking suggestion.”

“You’re keeping what he’s sent so far. How is a fan any worse?”

Sophronia paused to consider the odd Lord Akeldama. During a Westminster Hive infiltration, when she and Sidheag had rescued Dimity, Sophronia had met and formulated a strange friendship with the dandy vampire. Seemingly without the ordinary formalities, he had taken her under his wing. He occasionally sent her small goodies of a fashionable, deadly, or silly persuasion—often all three. If Sophronia wasn’t convinced of the vampire’s romantic disinterest, she might have thought them courting gifts. The presents were so lovely she couldn’t help but keep them, even though by all standards of decency she ought to have sent them right back to London. Sophronia suspected that actually requesting something specific, like a bladed fan, might be considered presumptuous, or worse, open her up to indenture and contractual obligation. Patronage was a sticky business, especially for a female intelligencer. If only Professor Braithwope were more mentally present. He was the one to ask.

Perhaps she would work on Mumsy first for the necessary, or see if she could get a message to Vieve at Bunson’s. Vieve was Professor Lefoux’s niece, now under cover of mustache at the local boys’ school. A great

inventor and friend, she might choose to make a bladed fan as a challenge, or take umbrage with the request, as it had been made before.

Sophronia switched topics. “Whatever else is the case, I need to pay closer attention to Soap’s lessons in dirty fighting. Flicking perfume in the face was his idea.”

“What?”

“Oh, you missed that bit. I slung scent in Preshea’s eyes.”

“Jolly good.”

“Soap taught me the technique.”

“Your sootie beau? Of course he would teach you such a thing.”

“He’s not my beau!”

“Whatever you say.”

Agatha came wandering over. “What’s going on now?”

“Sophronia’s muttering about visiting her sootie beau for more lessons in ungentlewomanly conduct.”

“Oh, dear me, no. Sophronia, I don’t think it wise to encourage him.” Agatha paled, making her freckles pop out under the moonlight.

Sophronia blushed. “Not that kind of thing. I mean dirty fighting.”

Agatha pursed her lips. “Of course you do.”

Sophronia turned away to watch the other girls fight. She had no way to defend herself on this particular subject. Sometimes she was horribly afraid her friends knew more than she did about her relationship with Soap. Ask her to learn a new weapon and she was ready and able, but learning how to cope with boys and affection still seemed elusive.

Mercifully, Captain Niall left them to recover while the rest of the class practiced fanning. An hour or so later, he shuffled them all back up the staircase. Sophronia, Agatha, and Dimity were the last up, only to find that Sidheag was waiting patiently at the top.

She was wearing an expression of such unhappiness, they all knew instantly that something was horribly wrong.

Missing Sidheags and Misapplied Seduction

Agatha ran the last few steps to the Scottish girl and placed an arm about her waist, squeezing her close. The redhead's round face was puckered in concern.

Sidheag certainly looked in need of that supporting arm. For the first time, Sophronia thought of her friend as willowy and frail, rather than tall and gawky.

"My dear, what has happened?" Dimity demanded, bracing herself as if against a physical blow, her tiny fists clenched.

"Who needs to be killed?" Sophronia asked, trying to lighten the mood but also feeling quite murderous at the very idea that anyone might cause her unflappable friend such pain.

Sidheag dismissed both their offers of support and Agatha's arm. "I can't… it's not… I just…" Her amber eyes caught the moonlight as she looked past them. "Captain Niall, please wait! Could you spare a moment to talk? Please?"

The werewolf was preparing to retreat behind a whortleberry bush to change forms and dash off into the night hunting rabbits, or something equally small and fuzzy.

Instead, he approached the base of the staircase, shading his eyes against the glare of the well-lit ship. He sniffed, not in hauteur, but like an animal tasting the air.

“Lady Kingair, what’s wrong?” He sniffed again. His voice changed, becoming rough and gravelly. “What has happened?”

Sidheag moved away from her friends. “I must talk to the captain. Only he can help.”

They let her go, reluctantly.

Sidheag stumbled as she climbed down, falling the last few steps.

Captain Niall caught her easily, supernatural strength barely troubled by her weight.

Once in his arms, she folded in on herself, broken.

The werewolf said something to her, so low the girls watching could not hear. Then he set her back on her feet. They were matched in height. Lady Linette would say that they’d dance well together. Except that Sidheag was a terrible dancer.

Sidheag raised her head, saying something soft in reply. Captain Niall responded with a gentle squeeze to the arm. Overcome once more, Sidheag crumpled, shoulders heaving. The werewolf whisked her off, his supernatural speed used in sympathy for once, into the darkness of the moor and away from prying eyes.

Sophronia, Dimity, and Agatha were left once again without their friend, alone at the top of the stairs. At least Sidheag’s behavior had not been observed. The shame of it, to show weakness and then affection, with a teacher!

Dimity’s hand was pressed to her mouth, her eyes widened against sympathetic tears. Agatha looked almost as shaky as Sidheag, so that Sophronia slipped an arm about her waist. They stood like that for a long time until a polite cough caught Sophronia’s attention.

“Miss, we need to crank up the stair.”

Sophronia turned to find Soap, standing shipside.

He looked about to crack one of his customary cheeky smiles. But the moment he saw her expression, he schooled his own and flitted over to join them. “What in all aether’s happened? Sophronia, are you hurt?” Usually he was punctiliously formal. They must look truly upset for him to call Sophronia by name.

“We don’t know.” A great deal of frustration colored Sophronia’s voice.

Soap’s eyes bored into hers, as if they were alone. “Not you?” His gaze flicked to her bandaged arm.

Sophronia shook her head. “No, I’m well. Just a little scrape with a fan. It’s Sidheag.”

Dimity tugged at her sleeve. “I’m sure this is a private matter! Hush.”

“Soap is her friend, too.”

Dimity bit her lip, uncomfortable with sharing anything that had so traumatized Sidheag with an underling, or a boy, or an outsider. Despite Soap’s ongoing friendship with Sophronia, Dimity was too much a lady not to see him as all three, all the time.

Dimity hissed, “Sidheag is *Lady Kingair*. I know that mostly we forget she’s all over titled, being Scottish and such, but still, should Lady Kingair *be* friends with a sootie?”

“Oh, Dimity, don’t be so snobbish. Sidheag can choose her own friends. And he might know something.”

Soap was clearly chuffed at Sophronia’s ready defense. Still, he responded to the meat of the matter. “Know something? About Lady Kingair? Not recently. Why, is she unwell?”

Sophronia shook her head helplessly. “Something has gone pear shaped. She received a pigeon and now she’s gone off into the moor with Captain Niall.”

“And she was crying. Sidheag. I shouldn’t have thought it possible,” whispered Agatha.

Soap considered. “Pigeon, huh? I’ll see what I can dig up. And now, before we all get into trouble, would you mind backing away from the stair, please? We have orders.”

Much sobered, the three made their way at a run to their next lesson. They had Lady Linette, and even with an emotional crisis of epic proportions, it wasn’t done to be late to a lesson with Lady Linette. They couldn’t even claim fashion as an excuse—Lady Linette forgave tardiness on account of style. But all three of them had grass stains on their gowns, and Sophronia’s sleeve was ripped and bloody. They were certain to get into trouble.

“Girls, why are you so very late?” Lady Linette’s blonde curls were perfectly arranged to spill over one shoulder in a style ill suited to a woman of her years. She wore too much face paint and a dress overly poufy and of that exact shade of pale green that became no one. But Lady Linette overdressed *with purpose*. She was actually prettier and younger

underneath, and would be quite the thing if she actually dressed her age, gave up rinsing her hair, and forayed into jewel-toned fabrics. For a reason Sophronia had yet to fathom, Lady Linette did not. She kept up the facade, and the girls, who had now mostly figured out that it was one, kept it with her. This, too, was part of their training.

Lady Linette's anger, however, was not faked. She turned it on Sophronia. "Explain yourself, young lady."

"Stairway wasn't working well. It started to go up while we were still on it, caused quite a ruckus. You might want to have it checked next time you have a mechanic in."

"Oh, indeed?"

Sophronia knew that the sooties would back her up in her fib, so long as she could get to them first. *I guess I'm visiting the sooties this evening.*

Lady Linette probably knew it, too, for she didn't pursue the reprimand. "I suppose that explains your abysmal attire as well?"

All three girls nodded.

"Well, don't let it happen again. You should have allowed time to change. You're old enough not to be overset by misbehaving stairways."

They all bobbed simultaneous perfect curtsies and chorused in unison, "Yes, Lady Linette."

"Or misbehaving vampires?" muttered Sophronia, under her breath.

Lady Linette flicked a curl at her. "Now that you have reminded me, Miss Temminnick, please stay after class. I must have a chat with you about that thing on your wrist."

In the time it took Lady Linette to say it, Sophronia had unbuckled the hurlie behind her back and passed it surreptitiously to Dimity.

"Of course, Lady Linette."

Lady Linette gestured for them to sit. In her classroom, seats were made up of plush ottomans and sofas. They resided alongside velvet curtains and tables covered in gold brocade. The room had a definite boudoir-of-ill-repute feeling.

As it turned out, this was well suited to their lesson.

Sophronia and Dimity took a vacant love seat at the front, Sophronia dislodging a large, fluffy cat with a scrunched-up face. The cat gave her a disgusted look. Or seemed to; it was hard to tell with that face.

Agatha scuttled to the back, sitting alone on a hassock, as if she were

truly in trouble. She slouched and stared at her feet, until Lady Linette reprimanded her and then began the lesson.

“Ladies, it has been decided that you are now old enough for lessons in the fine art of seduction. And so we will begin with multidirectional flirting. Few of you will have the opportunity to practice on boys for a good while yet, since we are no longer keeping company with Bunson’s.” She turned suddenly to Sophronia and Dimity. “Except you ladies, of course. I understand Miss Temminnick’s brother has recently acquired a fiancée? And that you two have leave to attend his engagement masquerade?”

They nodded.

“Well, pay close attention, then, masquerade balls are ideal practice grounds.” She turned back and began instruction.

“She’s still angry about it,” hissed Dimity to Sophronia.

They had gone behind Lady Linette’s back to the headmistress with their absence request. Mademoiselle Geraldine would grant permission purely on the grounds of marriage prospects, despite the fact that neither girl was officially *out*. Lady Linette would have thwarted the whole thing; it wasn’t done to take off in the middle of session. But Mademoiselle Geraldine agreed with Sophronia that engagement balls were mandatory when one was related to the groom—it was the family’s only opportunity for ostentatious show. Dimity had taken more effort. Finally, they had hit upon the fact that Dimity’s birthday was around the same time. Mademoiselle Geraldine had proved amenable, and Lady Linette had been forced to make a show of following the headmistress’s orders.

“Seduction in its purest form is a never-ending acquisition of knowledge about another individual. Every male is a new challenge, every occasion warrants a different approach. Take the greatest of care when applying these techniques, for they can be more dangerous than actual weaponry.”

The girls all straightened. Lady Linette’s lessons were always interesting, but seduction was supposed to be the best. What young lady didn’t want to know how to manipulate a man? This was what finishing school was all about!

“You already have eyelash fluttering and flirting with fan and parasol, now let us consider holding a man’s gaze with intent and purpose. This can be perceived as a bold stance, an outright challenge, or an unspoken offer. Let me demonstrate.” Lady Linette came before each of them and with a

few micromovements of lashes and lids demonstrated the differences among the three gazes. Each girl tried each gaze in return, feeling awkward, and then practiced on a partner for several minutes, feeling even more awkward. Periodically, fits of giggles interrupted the concentrated staring.

Eventually Dimity said, “Lady Linette, I don’t mean to be ignorant, but what, exactly, is the *unspoken offer*? I mean to say, how do I know if I don’t know, as it were?”

“Ah, yes, seduction. Have you read some of those horrid Gothics floating about? Oh, now, don’t be coy, I’ve seen copies of *The Monk* passing from hand to hand. It’s not forbidden, not at *this* school. Such an offer can encompass all things that men, as a general rule, require of women—from a kiss on the hand to one on the neck to the lips and beyond.”

Dimity’s eyes went owlish. “There’s a *beyond*?”

“Don’t interrupt, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. Where was I? Oh, yes. Then there is touching. A man may try to put his hands anywhere upon you, if you let him. A gentleman, of course, will ask first, but he will still try.”

“Anywhere?” squeaked Dimity.

“Anywhere,” said Lady Linette darkly.

“Oh, my.”

Sophronia giggled at Dimity’s awe. She herself was equipped with older brothers, several of whom attended university. Even before finishing school she had enjoyed eavesdropping on her family. As a result of indiscreet conversations between said brothers, she was rather more familiar with the intentions of young gentlemen than she ought to be. Apparently, gentlemen not only liked to kiss and touch women everywhere, they did that and more, on a regular basis, and mostly not with ladies at all, but with women of less genteel breeding. Some gentlemen, her brothers had whispered, even did it with each other. Although this was considered quite uncouth, Sophronia gathered, once one left Eton.

“Is that what the longing look is offering?” Dimity wanted to know.

“Generally speaking, yes. It is an invitation.”

“Oh, dear, rather powerful, isn’t it?”

Sophronia suspected Dimity would never look a man in the face again, for fear of issuing invitations.

“This is why you must master the differences among the three, not to mention the nature and length of the look itself. Facial expressions, my

dears, can be thought of as part of one's toilette. In fact, clothing can also transmit messages. Tight stays, for example, offer up to the gentleman the slenderness of one's waist. Wouldn't he like to put his hands about it? A low décolletage suggests that he might like to touch, just there."

All the girls gasped. A few who were wearing dresses with low necklines surreptitiously tried to tug them up.

Sophronia found herself thinking of Felix Mersey. The young viscount had taken rather a shine to her, almost a year ago now, and they maintained a cautiously civil correspondence. The kind of correspondence no parent would sniff at. Although Sophronia's mother might have had the vapors if she'd known her daughter was receiving missives from a duke's son. Vapors of joy, mind you. Once or twice Sophronia had, rather desperately, searched between Felix's brief lines of courteous discourse for something more. But Lord Mersey either hadn't it in him to pen words of love, or had lost his taste for Sophronia after her Westminster Hive infiltration. In which case, his letters were mere formality from a gentleman who would not be so rude as to break off a courtship via the written word. Sophronia suspected the latter. After all, it would shake any gentleman's regard to find the object of his affection dressed as a male dandy and cavorting about with a chimney sweep.

Not that Sophronia was at all sure she wanted such attentions from Lord Mersey. His father was a Pickleman. She had come to like some of the supernatural set, all of whom, she knew in her heart, the Picklemen would happily see dead. As much as she admired Felix's slouch and overconfident flirtations, how could she reconcile his politics with her dislike of his father's secret society?

Nevertheless, Sophronia found herself daydreaming about the upcoming masquerade. She'd written to Felix of the momentous occasion, more for something to say than in the hope that anything should come of it. But, of course, he'd managed to wangle himself an invitation—after all, he was training to be an evil genius and his father *was* a duke. *If I wear a low-cut gown*, she wondered, *will Felix want to touch my décolletage? And do I want to lure him in because I think I may have lost him? Or do I want him for himself? He does have very nice eyes. And his waistcoat is always well fitted.*

Sophronia cocked her head, considering. *And would I want him to kiss*

me and more? Her pulse raced and she had to consciously slow her breathing so Lady Linette would not notice. *It's amazing that there are such possibilities inherent in just a longing look. Men really are weak willed.*

Lady Linette stopped the looks and returned to instruction. "What were we discussing?"

"Um, touching," said Preshea, in an unusually meek tone.

"Oh, yes. He may also wish to *kiss* there."

"What, the *décolletage*?" Dimity squeaked.

"Quite often."

Sophronia, thinking of her brothers' lewd talk, asked, "And elsewhere?"

Lady Linette smiled. "Well, yes, the very best ones like to kiss all over."

Most of the girls inhaled in shock, and then began asking questions all at once. What did it feel like? Was it nice or was it damp? After touching and kissing, what happened? And could this really all start with simply staring directly into a man's face at a ball?

Agatha looked as if she would like to faint. Dimity's cheeks were rosy with embarrassment, but she was utterly enthralled. Sophronia hated to admit it, but so was she.

Lady Linette held up a hand as the wave of curiosity crashed over her. Had she been a more sensitive individual, like Sister Mattie, she might have been embarrassed by the unladylike enthusiasm. But Lady Linette was an expert in manipulation, and if knowledge of connubial relations would arm her girls better in how to infiltrate society, then she would deliver unto them the necessary.

"Calm down, ladies, do. Let us practice a few more initial seduction techniques, and discuss more on the consequences later. We are all a little overwrought at the moment. Suffice it to say that you must remember all the rules of polite society. No more than two dances with the same gentleman. No longer than the space of a dance and a half hour in one man's company. Do not walk out with a male alone, especially not to the conservatory, unless you are related. The goal is always to keep yourself safe from ruin or accusations thereof. After you have mastered the initial looks, we will move on to the seduction itself, and the boundaries that you must keep in place to protect your reputation. I will discuss how to employ canoodles and of which variety, without being caught. We may even study some light anatomy. Anything more than that, I hope you all understand, is

reserved for the marriage bed. It is your mother's responsibility to explain such details of that situation to you as she sees fit."

An audible sigh of disappointment met this statement.

The girls then spent a most enjoyable hour practicing longing looks without any true understanding of what might result. It wasn't all that different from the entirety of their education at the academy. In a strange way, it was like practicing to kill someone with a bladed fan when one had yet to experience any actual act of assassination. Sophronia found herself more worried about how to respond to an imagined Felix kiss—the amount of pressure, what if there was excess saliva, where to put one's hands?—than she was about dealing out death. Although the concerns were oddly similar—amount of pressure, what if there was excess blood, how to keep one's gloves clean?

Of course, Sophronia had kissed Soap. Or more precisely, Soap had kissed her. Which had managed to be both comforting and unsettling. She didn't like to think about her friend in *that* way. Although, when she let herself, Sophronia was all too apt to ruminate upon Soap's kiss. It had been a very nice kiss. And she hadn't worried about pressure or saliva or her hands; Soap had taken care of all of it. He was like that. Felix would be different. So very publicly suitable, a duke's son, yet so very politically unsuitable, *that* duke's son. Sophronia admitted to titillation; Felix was a challenge.

Sophronia shook off thoughts of both boys, which wasn't easy when practicing seduction. Thinking of Soap, she found, turned her longing gaze into one of frustration and puzzlement. And thinking of Felix made Dimity, her partner, come over very fidgety.

"Sophronia, don't look at me like that!"

"Like what?"

"All wistful, it makes me uncomfortable."

"Isn't that the point?"

"I don't know, is it? Lady Linette, please come assess Sophronia's look. I think she's executing it wrong."

Lady Linette duly came over and Sophronia duly looked at her and thought of Felix.

Lady Linette blinked back at her, impassive. "No, I think that is rather good. Perhaps a bit too much of an offer, Miss Temminnick. Can you tone it

down slightly?”

Sophronia tried to think of both Felix and Soap at once.

“Oh, dear me, no, dear. No. Better the first time. Keep practicing.”

Sophronia tried again.

Preshea said, “Ooooh, Sophronia, who are you thinking about?” Exchanging smug glances with a few of her cronies, she added, “I wager we can guess.”

When Sophronia did not answer, Preshea added, “And how is our dear Lord Mersey?” There was an edge of bitterness to the sly question. She had rather fancied the young viscount for herself. Miss Preshea Buss was so pretty, she resented that he seemed so concentrated on plain, brown Sophronia.

Sophronia replied, blandly, “He’s well, thank you for asking. Should I tender your regards?” The implication being, of course, that she had the right of correspondence when Preshea did not.

Preshea tossed her glossy black curls. “No, thank you. Besides, you’ll see him before another letter gets through.”

“Indeed I will, at my brother’s soiree.” Sophronia’s tone was deceptively mild. “With ample time for conversation, as he has already requested the dinner dance.”

At which every girl in the room glanced at her with envy. Sophronia hadn’t meant to antagonize the whole class. She’d only meant to use the social cachet to quiet Preshea.

“Ladies, a little less gossip, a little more longing looks!” reprimanded their teacher. “Sophronia, you might consider your choice of escort with better care in the future. Lord Mersey is not on the agenda for a marriage of infiltration, and Picklemen do not make good patrons.” Sophronia was duly chastised.

The others got back to it, giggling softly among themselves.

Dimity asked Sophronia, “Did he really ask you for the dinner?”

“No, but he will.”

“Are you sure? I thought you were afraid you’d lost him.”

Sophronia fanned out her gloved hands in a gesture of dismissal. “Perhaps, but not to Preshea, I haven’t! Besides, he’s still interested enough to come to my family’s masquerade. Although that could be because as a gentleman he can only politely break off with me in person.”

Dimity nodded her understanding. “If you learn these seduction lessons well, you might be able to keep him. Despite Lady Linette’s opinion, I think he’s a delicious prospect. For fun, if nothing else. I should like to see you try.”

Sophronia firmed up her spine. “You’re right! Let’s practice.”

They tried diligently for the next twenty minutes. Sophronia wished for Sidheag. She was very good on the subject of understanding the male psyche, having grown up in a werewolf pack, all of them soldiers, not to mention visits with the rest of the regiment regularly. Her knowledge was far more complete than Sophronia’s bits of gleaned gossip from indiscreet brothers.

At the end of the lesson, Dimity and Agatha scuttled off, eager to return to their private chambers, hoping that Sidheag would be waiting there, pigeon crisis averted. Dimity carried Sophronia’s hurlie safely stashed in her reticule, out of Lady Linette’s clutches.

That good lady rarely forgot anything. “Well, Miss Temminnick, give it to me.”

“Lady Linette?”

“The unregistered wrist claw thing you used to save yourself earlier this evening.”

Sophronia pulled back her sleeves, showing the bandage on one side and the complete absence of the hurlie on the other. “I’m afraid I lost it in that very scrabble. You see, I had to leave it behind, hooked on, in order to get through the hatch.”

Lady Linette was skeptical.

Sophronia stood quietly, no elaboration that might give away the lie, no excess blinking that might betray a direct falsehood. She was applying, with great expertise, every one of the lessons that Lady Linette herself had taught her.

“Sometimes, Miss Temminnick, I worry that we are training you *too* well.”

“Is that possible, Lady Linette?”

“I don’t know. I suppose in the end it will ride on where your loyalties lie.”

“I suppose it will.”

“Where *do* they lie, Miss Temminnick? You are what, sixteen now? Old

enough to marry. Old enough to leave this school, should your parents wish it."

"I haven't learned everything yet."

"Nor have you finished properly. That is not the point."

"What is the point?"

"You are old enough to know your own mind. Whose patronage will you undertake? Queen and country, supernatural, Picklemen? Will you follow your training in the pursuit of our ends, or those of your beau?"

"And what of my own wishes?"

Lady Linette was not so foolish as to answer that. "Or the vampire who sends you gifts?"

"Reading my mail, Lady Linette? How gauche. I guess the answer to your question is, I don't know yet." Sophronia felt emboldened. "I like this school but not the potentate, although working for queen and country seems no bad thing."

"The one is tied to the other, I'm afraid." Lady Linette seemed genuinely contrite, either because of the potentate himself—who did have a regrettable personality—or the fact that Queen Victoria's government had so fully integrated the supernatural element.

"That is the difficulty, isn't it? Right now my vampire friend's gifts, I must own, are attractive. Although not my vampire friend himself," Sophronia replied.

Lady Linette was looking at Sophronia with more respect than she had ever shown before. "He is not so bad a choice. We would be sad to lose you, but he could absolutely afford your indenture. Although he is a vampire; he might want something extra for it."

Sophronia felt almost like an equal. What, she wondered, had just happened in that class to cause this shift in her own social standing with her teacher? Whatever it was, she hoped to capitalize on it. She rather enjoyed the novelty of garnering respect from an adult. So she accessed her training and responded as it dictated.

"When I have made up my mind, Lady Linette, you'll be the first to know." *Well, after Dimity, Agatha, Sidheag, and Soap. And Bumbersnoot. Bumbersnoot will have to be included in any of my future plans.*

"Very considered response, Miss Temminnick. A word of warning: you can't change him, Miss Temminnick."

“Who? My vampire friend or my Pickleman beau?”

“Yes.” Then, in one of her rapid switches of topic, designed—they had all learned—to unsettle an opponent, Lady Linette said, “Where is Lady Kingair, Miss Temminnick?”

“Unwell,” said Sophronia, instinctually covering for her friend’s absence.

“Oh, indeed, and what form of illness has afflicted her? She’s customarily so hardy.”

When fibbing, always stick as close to the truth as possible. “Of the sentimental variety. She had a letter that quite overset her.”

Lady Linette’s expression changed. So much so that Sophronia wondered if she knew the contents of Sidheag’s letter. Had she intercepted a private pigeon before it reached its intended target? Highly illegal, of course, worse than reading Lord Akeldama’s notes, but Lady Linette was an intelligencer. She did more illegal things before tea each day than most people did in a lifetime.

The teacher said, “Understandable sentiment, I suppose. But I expect to see her at supper, otherwise I will send matron. Perhaps she is in need of laudanum to settle her nerves.”

“Very good, Lady Linette. I will let her know.”

With which Sophronia escaped, gliding down the passageway as quickly as her skirts would allow.

Sidheag had not returned, not that they could conceive of a way for her to do so without being found out. The school was, after all, floating midair and very high up. In deference to the presence of Preshea; her new chamber-mate, Frenetta; and a gaggle of other girls, the three friends retreated to Sophronia and Dimity’s room. Bumbersnoot was delighted to see them. The little mechanimal trundled about tooting smoke out his ears and puffing steam from below his carapace. His tail tick-tocked back and forth and Agatha, despite Sophronia’s admonishments not to spoil him, fed the metal dog torn scraps of a brown paper bag that had once held sweets.

“What will we do if she is out all night, alone, with a werewolf?” Dimity was upset by the very idea.

“He’s a teacher, surely that counts for something?” protested Agatha.

“He’s not a relative. If word gets out, her reputation will be in ruins.” Dimity was probably correct in this assumption. “Didn’t we just learn that a

young lady should never be alone with a gentleman for any length of time? Do the other teachers know she is with him?"

Sophronia said, "I don't think so. Lady Linette just asked me where she was."

Dimity swallowed. "That is *not* good."

"Worse, she only has until supper to reappear. Matron's coming by to check."

"Then what will we do? Pillows in the bed won't work on matron. None of us looks enough like Sidheag to pull a wig-and-switch, either." Dimity wasn't the best intelligencer, but some of the training had stuck.

Sophronia was out of options. "We have to hope she returns in time. Nothing else for it." She sat down on her bed with a thump.

Dimity said out loud what they had all three been secretly wondering: "Do you think Lord Maccon has been successfully challenged?" It was a most delicate way of putting it. Lord Maccon was Sidheag's great-great-great-grandfather, in truth the only father she had. He was also Alpha of the Kingair Pack, and Alphas had to fight for their position constantly. He was supposed to be the second-most-powerful werewolf in all of Britain, but new werewolves did happen, and loners, those unattached to a pack like Captain Niall, could be strong. If one had challenged Lord Maccon and won, it meant the Laird of Kingair was dead.

Sophronia said, "I don't like to think it, but it would explain Sidheag's behavior."

Agatha, who knew Sidheag better than anyone, began to cry.

"Hush, now, we don't *know* that's what happened," Sophronia tutted at her. "It could just be war. Queen Victoria is always sending her werewolves to fight on the front lines somewhere foreign."

Bumbersnoot butted up against one of Agatha's slippered feet, his tail wagging a little less, his floppy leather ears wiggling sympathetically.

Agatha blubbered, "But she does love him so. I know she talks gruff, but he's her one and only Gramps. If he's been hurt or killed…" Great fat tears trickled down her round, freckled face.

"Now, now, Agatha, where's your handkerchief? You'll come over all blotchy, and Professor Lefoux will notice in our next class. Can't have that." Sophronia bustled about collecting one of her spares.

Agatha tried to recover her emotions. She was terrified of Professor

Lefoux. Professor Lefoux had no respect for finer feelings, even when they were being applied with purpose. Gadgets, felt Professor Lefoux, solved any problem.

Agatha disposed of one damp handkerchief, and by the time she'd finished with another, her sobs had subsided.

"Good girl," said Sophronia.

Dimity said, "Sophronia's right. We don't know the real truth of any of it."

Sophronia added, "If Sidheag doesn't return, our only hope is that Soap has uncovered something of merit."

Dimity and Agatha looked uncomfortable. They knew it meant Sophronia was sneaking out later that night on one of her clandestine visits to engineering. They also knew it meant Sophronia had no means of protecting Sidheag's reputation, because if she had, she would be doing that instead.

Matron would come and Sidheag would not be there.

So it turned out to be.

The Uncleanliness of Soap

While they nibbled a meal of baked cod, boiled aitch-bone of beef, carrots, turnips, and suet dumplings, Sophronia thought hard on which would be worse for Sidheag: being found missing on her own or having it known she was alone with a werewolf. After munching for a while in silence, Sophronia whispered, “We must try to hold off saying anything to anyone until tomorrow. Let me have a confab with Soap, see what he’s turned up. We can decide who to tell what before breakfast.”

Dimity blanched. “By which time Sidheag will have been out with *him* all night.”

Agatha added, looking down the table at Preshea, “And if anyone but us finds out, her reputation really will be in tatters.”

“Can’t be helped. At least we know Sidheag can handle a werewolf no matter his mood or form.”

Dimity put down the roll she was buttering. “Good thing we have Mademoiselle Geraldine after cards tonight.”

The other two nodded.

The headmistress was part of their training at the academy. She was kept in complete ignorance as to the clandestine nature of the lessons, so when they had a class with her it was *real* finishing. Mademoiselle Geraldine instructed them on manners, social niceties, tables of precedence, tea sipping, and the like. Any espionage techniques were assigned to them before they met with the headmistress, usually by Lady Linette. Luckily, tonight they already had instructions, so all Sophronia, Dimity, and Agatha

had to do was avoid answering any uncomfortable questions as to their friend's whereabouts during the course of the meal.

They managed all the way through to the sweets course, orange pudding with Naples biscuits and sherry. Then, by dint of running a boisterous and absorbing game of speculation after the pudding, they avoided any kind of private conference during cards.

They dawdled as much as possible while the mechanicals cleaned up, so that they had to glide with extreme rapidity on to Mademoiselle Geraldine's class, on the far side of the airship. They utilized some of the lesser-known passageways, disturbing more than one servant mechanical. If she had known what was really going on, Lady Linette might indeed feel that she had trained her students too well. Or she might be proud. In any event, she couldn't be too worried about Sidheag or they never would have gotten away with it.

Safely ensconced with Mademoiselle Geraldine, who was instructing them in how to flirt at a hunting party, tweed jodhpurs notwithstanding, they made it through to bedtime unencumbered.

By the time Lady Linette came around to check that lights were out at two in the morning, they were all three solidly asleep.

Sidheag's bed was empty.

After Lady Linette closed the door to their parlor, Sophronia was out of bed with a glass to the jamb so quickly she managed to catch Lady Linette saying to Sister Mattie in the hall, "Unfortunately, Sister, I believe we have one missing—Lady Kingair. It's going to be messy if we've misplaced an aristocrat. Even if she is Scottish."

Sister Mattie, who had been checking on the debuts, said something sympathetic in a low tone. They moved down the hallway, out of eavesdropping range.

Sophronia's nightgown was so voluminous she could pull it on over her preferred after-hours attire—a pair of her brother's old breeches, with a corset under a gentleman's shirt and a waistcoat over the top. Sophronia didn't like to dress as a boy, not the way her friend Vieve did, but it was awfully practical for climbing. She scooped up Bumbersnoot, dressed in his frilly reticule disguise, and slung him over one shoulder. Bumbersnoot usually came with her to engineering. He liked to eat fallen bits of coal, and Sophronia thought it only right he go down to the boiler room and visit the

mechanical gods. As Dimity had once said, “I wonder if engineering, for Bumbersnoot, is like church. Or am I being apocryphal?”

Sophronia was on her own. Dimity, after a few ill-fated jaunts, had elected to leave that dirty, smelly, greasy place to Sophronia and Sidheag. It was too rough for a *real* lady, she claimed. Dimity wanted to be a lady rather more than she wanted to be an intelligencer. She liked the idea of practicing charitable works on the sooties, but gave that up in favor of filching nibbles at tea and sending them down with Sophronia to the unfortunates, as she called them, with her regards. Thus she did not risk smudges on her gown or crude language in her delicate ear.

Agatha simply hadn’t that much of an interest in anything covert. Also, given the option between sleep and pretty much anything else, Agatha would *always* rather sleep.

The hallway outside was dark. The teachers turned off the gas after inspections. Sophronia, hurlie on one wrist and an even more illegal gadget, the obstructor, on the other, navigated with ease. The hurlie handled climbing and swinging from balcony to balcony, and the obstructer froze into six-second stillness any mechanical before it could raise the alarm. As a result, Sophronia was in engineering in under a quarter of an hour. She considered timing herself with a pocket watch next jaunt—how fast could she get around an airship if she really tried? When Professor Braithwope fell, Sophronia had risked life and limb swinging at speed, but that was almost a year ago, and she was better with the hurlie now. She could probably do it safer and faster. She flinched, thinking about that incident. *Poor old Professor Braithwope.*

Soap was waiting for her behind their customary coal pile.

Sophronia was a lot less conspicuous fraternizing with sooties dressed as a boy than when she’d first come down, stirring up dust in full skirts and a silly hat. She settled on the coal pile next to Soap’s lanky frame.

“What ho, miss?”

“Good evening, Soap, any word on Sidheag’s pigeon?” There was no point in shilly-shallying about with pleasantries. Sophronia and Soap were close enough to have done away with social niceties a long time ago. Besides, he was common born and didn’t care for such folderol. Sensible man, Soap.

“I didn’t get a peek at the message itself—either Sidheag still has it with

her or they burned it right quick. But I did overhear a few things while tinkering with a dodgy boiler in Lady Linette's parlor. The human staff sure gossip." Soap's dark eyes were grave, but he managed to exude warmth and welcome.

Sophronia relaxed into the comfort of his familiar affection. "Go on."

He leaned in toward her, unconsciously intimate. "Well, miss, it sure seems to be a matter of pack. Things are unsettled in Kingair."

Sophronia shifted; he was a little too close, not preserving the space most gentlemen leave in the presence of a lady. "So we gathered. Is Lord Maccon dead?"

Ever attuned to her moods, Soap registered her discomfort and slumped back into the coal pile, as if it were an armchair. This instantly reassured her. "No truck on anyone dying. So I think we're safe in assuming it's no challenge. But it does seem like to be concerning Lord Maccon."

Sophronia frowned—if he wasn't dead, what could possibly be the problem? "How do you mean?"

"Word is that he's maybe losing control."

"Of his clavigers?" This time she leaned in to the conversation, struggling to make herself heard against a new din in the boiler room.

"No, of his pack."

Sophronia thought back to everything Sidheag had told her about the Kingair werewolves. "Lord Maccon? He's supposed to be the strongest Alpha in England, with the exception of the dewan."

Soap smiled as though they were in on a joke together. "And some would say even the Queen's Werewolf would lose three out of five challenges. It seems that it's not Lord Maccon's strength in question, it's the behavior of the rest of the Kingair Pack."

"They *are* Scottish."

"It's worse than that, miss."

Sophronia cracked a small joke. "Is there something worse than being Scottish?"

Soap declined to play. "Being a sootie, and having the wrong color skin to boot?"

In his eyes was something like the longing look they had practiced in class earlier that evening. Sophronia didn't like it coming from Soap, and she didn't know how to defuse it. Lady Linette hadn't taught them that

tactic yet. She hadn't told them what to do when one was on the *receiving* end of unwanted longing. *Perhaps that's something I should ask about next class.*

"Behavior of the pack? Aren't they all instinctually bound to follow him until another challenges and wins? I do wish Professor Braithwope were available to consult. I suppose Professor Lefoux might have some insight."

But strangely enough, Soap had further to offer on the subject. "It's not that simple, miss. Beta supports, Gamma objects, loners challenge, and the others fall about the scale. Alpha is not an easy position to hold. I wouldn't want it."

"Soap, how is it you suddenly know so much about werewolves?"

Soap shrugged. "I take an interest. Not all sudden, you just never asked. I've been thinking… if I went out for anything long term, claviger might be it. I'd sooner indenture to a pack than bind to a hive."

Sophronia had never even considered that Soap, of all people, might hunger for immortality. "Pardon? You'd rather be a werewolf than a vampire?"

Soap's eyes, in the flickering light of the boiler, were almost hungry looking. "I don't want to suck blood, although I'd take the rank that came with either and be grateful. But werewolves have fewer restrictions; even a sootie can make claviger. Plus, I like the idea of a pack, don't you?"

"Sort of like collecting a bunch of grown-up hairy sooties?" guessed Sophronia, feeling somehow hurt the more she considered it. *How could I not know this about Soap? My Soap? Stupid not to realize he wants more out of life than shoving coal in boilers all day long*. He had seemed eager for her reading lessons, but she'd suspected it was an excuse to spend more time with her. Now she thought there might be more to it: social climbing. Soap had his own plans, which he hadn't confided and which—worse—didn't include her.

Soap smiled at his fellow sooties rushing around. "These old cusses, my pack?" Many of the sooties regarded Soap as a kind of unofficial mayor of the boiler room. There were firemen and greasers, adults ranked far above them, but if one wanted to mobilize the sooties, even the head of engineering knew it was best to get Soap to do it.

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I suppose they are. Don't you like the idea of a pack, miss? You kinda got yourself one, what with all your

projects."

"Projects" was what Soap called Sophronia's various female friends.

Sophronia tried to be fair and consider life from Soap's perspective. It was jolly hard to imagine, since he was a different class, color, *and* sex. Still, if he hadn't any opportunities to further himself, and if that was what he wanted? Not to mention the chance of immortality?

"So that's why you've learned everything you can about werewolves?"

"Indeed. Miss Maccon's been bonny good with that." Soap and Sidheag preferred to pretend he didn't know she had a title, made everyone more relaxed. Sidheag enjoyed being lowly Miss Maccon when she smeared around with the sooties.

Sophronia felt almost compelled to change the subject, but the more she thought about her dear Soap pursuing something so dangerous, the more the ache of worry in her stomach expanded. She tried to stay calm. "But Soap, indenture as a claviger? You're little better than a warden against moon-madness. You serve the pack's whims with no guarantee that they'll let you try for metamorphosis. It could take *years*."

"At least there's a chance of clean, honest work in the interim. Better than being a sootie, and better than being food, like a drone." He sounded serious about the scheme.

Sophronia's stomachache expanded into fear, clogging up her throat and thickening her voice. "You do know how rare survival is and how dangerous?" She barked the words, her panic blossoming into anger. Statistics weren't published, but everyone was aware that few could withstand metamorphosis. It was a huge risk!

Soap's gentle tone did not rise to match her stridency. "I know the odds."

"And you'll wager your whole life on them? That's idiotic!" She switched tactics, forcing her voice to mellow. "If, by some puny chance, you did survive a bite, then there's military service. Even werewolves die in the front lines."

"And others come back war heroes and are granted a holding. Can you imagine, I'd be landed gentry?"

"You could be decades in some foreign land!"

"It's a chance to travel."

"That's a stupid reason to risk werewolf!" *I wouldn't see you. You'd be*

gone. You'd leave me behind.

Soap was clearly startled, perhaps even hurt by her rage. His posture altered, tense in the arms and shoulders.

Sophronia pressed her eyes with her hand and sensed Soap calm in response to her worried gesture. His slight slouch returned. She couldn't say that she would miss him, because she was afraid it might work and hold him back. And if this really was his dream? It would be as bad for her to hold him with empty promises as it would be for him to do this for the wrong reason.

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Soap, it's only that I worry."

Soap softened and put his hand close to hers where it rested on the coal pile—almost touching. "I know, miss, but it's my choice in the end. And it's not like I'd have a long, healthy life as a sootie."

"No good options. That's what I'm afraid of." *When did Soap get so stubborn?* Sophronia was amazed to find she was shivering.

Soap dared to move his hand and cover her shaking one. Sophronia found the hard calluses on his palm oddly comforting. They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the clangs and rattles of the boilers. Sophronia calmed, becoming quietly angry at herself for getting so emotional over a friend. A good friend, but only a friend. She extracted her hand from his, gently but firmly.

Finally Soap said, "I may know where Miss Maccon has gone."

Sophronia brightened, more at the switch in topics than the information. "Oh, good. Where?"

"I think she and Captain Niall have gone to London."

"Goodness, why?" Now her excitement was over the information itself.

"Because the captain is a strong werewolf loner. If Lord Maccon's got control problems, Miss Maccon is the type to use Niall as a solution. She'll do whatever she can to hold that pack of hers together."

"Why London?"

"Rumor is, that's where Lord Maccon was last headed."

"A Scottish werewolf in London? That will make the local packs mad." Sophronia shuddered. She'd seen Lord Vulkasin, Alpha of Woolsey Pack, only once, and he'd terrified her. If Lord Maccon was anything like that, London might not survive their meeting.

Soap said, "That's why the dewan works for the queen. Keeps the peace

between Alphas.”

“But for Sidheag to leave with no word to us? No word to the teachers?”

Soap shrugged. “Bet she’ll try to send word, soon as she can. I’d keep an eye fixed.”

“On the other hand, could be she doesn’t trust someone here at school. In which case, she might try to reach me at home at that dratted ball of my brother’s.” Sophronia stood, brushing down her trousers. “It’s getting late, I should go to bed.”

Soap followed the movement of her hands; her legs were plainly visible without formal skirts and petticoats.

Sophronia stopped, self-conscious.

Soap looked away, muttered something to himself. Then abruptly he said, “You’ll be dancing with that Felix nobbin, won’t you? At this fool ball of your family’s?”

“I will.” Sophronia, surprised by the question, temporarily forgot her policy of evading all things romantic around Soap.

“He’s a snoot-airing toff.”

“He is.” Sophronia was at a loss to do anything but agree with Soap. She’d never seen him in such a tetchy mood, and they’d already argued once this evening. She didn’t want to push her luck.

“Dad’s a Pickleman, you recall that?”

“It’s part of the attraction, I suppose.”

Soap glared at her. “Never thought you would be one to steam in for naughty boys, miss.”

Sophronia stiffened, annoyed that Soap was pursuing this subject so doggedly. “There’s a certain level of appeal.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?”

“Soap, I can’t have this discussion with you!”

“Oh ho, why not? I wager you talk with the young miss projects about it.”

“They’re girls!”

“And I’m not.”

“I certainly hope not, or you’ve been acting a better hoax than Vieve ever pulled.”

Soap moved in close, quick as a supernatural; perhaps he was halfway to werewolf already. He certainly looked fiercer than she’d ever thought

possible. “Happy to prove it by tossing that Felix blighter out the hatch anytime.”

Sophronia couldn’t help but giggle at the image—poor Felix would be so surprised, clutching his top hat and floating through the air. “Oh, Soap, you are droll.”

Soap blinked and slid back into familiar friend territory. “Well, then, miss, you tell that to the other sooties? Lately they been taking me seriously.”

“That’s ’cause you been all over moody,” barked one sootie, moving past them at a trot.

“Goodness, Soap, imagine taking *you* seriously!”

“Yes, imagine that?” said Soap, all smiles, but Sophronia detected an edge of bitterness.

Sophronia made good her escape, unsettled by the whole conversation. Sidheag going to London. Soap becoming a claviger and then a werewolf! She wanted her old silly boyish Soap back. The one who didn’t care for the state of the world. The one who made no plans to be immortal, who took no grave risks. The one whose eyes merely twinkled with mischief and nothing else. She wanted things as they were. *And I thought it would be such fun to grow up. I can’t tell Dimity about it, either*. Dimity wouldn’t understand. Dimity would tell her to stop visiting engineering. But as much as Sophronia was unsettled by the new Soap, she felt a sharp pain at the very idea of not seeing him at all. *Oh, bother*, thought Sophronia, *why is he trying to ruin everything?*

Next morning they told Lady Linette that Sidheag had disappeared. They said they thought she’d simply gone off to mope somewhere alone with her thoughts and her disturbing letter.

“You didn’t see her leave the ship?”

They all shook their heads.

Dimity twirled a lock of golden-brown hair.

Agatha looked at her feet.

“You’re quite certain? She wasn’t with anyone? This could be important.”

“Perhaps if we knew something of that letter?” replied Sophronia,

knowing it wouldn’t work, but drawing a kind of battle line in the intelligencer sand.

“Indeed. Perhaps. But I’m afraid I don’t know myself.”

Sophronia narrowed her eyes. Lady Linette’s cornflower-blue ones were impassive. They both inclined their heads in acknowledgment. *At least we both know where we stand*, thought Sophronia.

“Very well, ladies, off with you. Breakfast won’t wait.”

For a fortnight they learned nothing more. There was no mail delivered. With Captain Niall gone, there was no one capable of running to Swiffle-on-Exe for the pickup. They didn’t go groundside, either. Professor Lefoux took over their bladed fan lessons. They had never before realized how integral a land-bound werewolf was to their collective mental stability. Floating in the gray drizzle—the general aspect of Dartmoor in January—with nary a peep from the rest of the world gave them all a malaise of the emotional humors. Even Dimity, who might have held to her bubbly nature with a birthday and a ball in her immediate future, remained troubled by Sidheag’s absence and stayed quiet.

Sophronia did not visit engineering. She was uncomfortable with moody Soap. Perhaps they both needed some distance. She wasn’t sure if she was punishing him for the gripes and hungry looks, or scared that she might unwittingly apply some of her seduction lessons to him. And the last thing she wanted to do was encourage her friend in a hopeless cause. His intent to turn werewolf felt near to a betrayal.

Dimity noted Sophronia’s lack of evening jaunts, as her repository of filched sweets grew ever larger with no clandestine distribution. Dimity felt it her ladylike duty to dispense tea-cake charity unto boiler room unfortunates. “Had a falling-out with your sootie beau, have you?”

“No,” said Sophronia shortly. “Just overly busy.”

“Busy with what?”

“Mastering the fan—I think I want it to be my trademark weapon. All great intelligencers have a trademark weapon.”

“And you’re choosing the fan because it’s both sensible and cooling?” suggested Dimity.

Agatha, who was spending time in their room as her own was lonely,

perked up. “I prefer the garrote myself.”

The others looked at her, startled. Aside from the theater, and sleeping, Agatha rarely expressed an interest in anything. Let alone something espionage related.

“You do?” Dimity encouraged.

Agatha nodded. “You can wear it as jewelry, it hides away easily, and it’s a nice clean death.”

“I hate to say it, but I’m with Preshea on dealing down, poison’s best.” Dimity was firm on the matter.

“No blood?” suggested Sophronia.

“Exactly!” Dimity twirled the bangles about her wrist and sighed. “Enough of this morbid talk.”

Agatha was looking at her small weekly planner. “Shouldn’t we be heading into Swiffle soon? Without Captain Niall to give you two a ride, the school will have to meet your transport itself.”

The two girls looked at each other. “Oh, dear me yes. Depending on where exactly we are right now, it could take weeks. I hope Lady Linette hasn’t forgotten about the fact that we are due at a masquerade in a few days.”

Sophronia agreed, “We’d best make sure.”

They shouldn’t have underestimated their teacher. Lady Linette was, after all, a mistress of information. It was her business to keep track of details.

During breakfast, which, since Mademoiselle Geraldine’s kept town hours, fell at around noon, the girls heard the unmistakable repetitive thudding of the school’s propeller cranking rhythmically below them. This could only mean one thing: the airship had a focused direction in mind. They were no longer gliding idly about the moor.

Dimity and Sophronia exchanged excited glances. Mademoiselle Geraldine’s floating finishing school was heading into town.

Stealth Mustaches and Stealthier Flywaymen

The school arrived at Swiffle-on-Exe late the following evening. It floated in over the River Exe itself, to take on water for the massive boilers in engineering. Then it took up its customary position, moored outside town, the mismatched turrets of Bunson and Lacroix's Boys' Polytechnique in view down a goat path.

Sophronia and Dimity were to depart early the next morning. They were excused from their last lesson of the night with Professor Braithwope, the idea being that they should get to bed before midnight. They tried to explain this to the vampire, who regarded them with a sobering eye, almost like his old self. The effect was lost, however, by the fact that he had taken it into his addlepated head to shave off his mustache.

Professor Braithwope's mustache, which he must have had as a mortal before he was metamorphosed into a vampire, was a tiny caterpillar-like object that perched upon his upper lip with an air of great uncertainty, like an amateur diver. This seemed to trouble the professor of late, for he would sporadically attempt to rid himself of the fuzzy protuberance. Since he was immortal, this did not work, for the moment the razor was put away his mustache grew back to its exact former state.

Sometimes, like tonight, he'd only managed to shave halfway before getting distracted, so the mustache looked as if it had lost its purchase at last and slid dangerously to the side and was trying, before their very eyes, to

claw its way back up. It was hypnotic and difficult not to stare because the facial hair grew as quickly as a vampire's wounds might heal.

"Young ladies, why are you leaving my class so soon, whot? I believe we have not yet even started. Wait a moment there! Don't I know you? Yes, I think I do, I believe you are dancers to perform this evening. Or, wait…"

Sophronia and Dimity curtsied apologetically.

"Sorry, sir," said Sophronia, "we're excused. There's this masquerade, you see?"

Dimity added, "Her brother is engaged, very exciting. We have to catch transport tomorrow and we need our beauty rest."

"Well, that is no lie," said Preshea from her seat near the back of the room.

The vampire lost interest halfway through their explanation. "Oh, yes, well, if you insist. Don't forget your sausage, whot." His mustache had almost resumed full bushiness.

"Of course not, sir," replied Sophronia with a perfectly straight face.

"I believe they are bringing Viscount Mersey, does he count as a sausage?" Preshea was inclined to be fresh.

Professor Braithwope turned on her. "Bratwurst or banger?" he snapped.

"Banger, most assuredly," replied Preshea.

The vampire thus distracted, Sophronia and Dimity made their escape, trying not to giggle.

They had already packed, terrified that they would forget something. And once in their room, they were far too excited to sleep, particularly not earlier than usual.

So instead they lay in their nightgowns talking.

"Are you pleased Lord Mersey will be there?"

Sophronia sighed. "I suppose so."

"He is very handsome. And very rich. And very titled." Dimity's tone gave nothing away.

"Yes, but you're the one who really wants to marry those things, not me."

"Then what *do* you want from a beau?"

Sophronia considered this question. It had been troubling her of late. Felix was good looking, but he rather knew that too much. And he was nicely mysterious. But as a Pickleman he would interfere with her

espionage operations, and that really couldn’t be countenanced in a beau. *Perhaps I can train him out of it?*

Before she could answer Dimity, a timid knock sounded at the door to the parlor. The two looked at each other. They were the only ones not in class; whoever was there must know this.

Sophronia climbed out of bed and pulled on a robe. She was less self-conscious about these things than Dimity. After her foray into dressing like a dandy, she’d given over most scruples concerning public appearances in impolite clothing. After all, her nightgown nicely covered her climbing outfit, even if it was intended for the bedchamber.

“Oh, Sophronia,” said Dimity, “they can wait while you dress.”

Since dressing, at the best of times, took a quarter of an hour, this was probably not wise. That knock had definitely sounded clandestine; besides, appearing at the door in said nightgown might unsettle the visitor, thus giving her an initial conversational advantage.

So Sophronia disregarded Dimity and padded through the parlor to open the hall door. A tall, shrouded figure pushed in past her without ceremony.

“What?”

“Shut the door, quickly now!”

Sophronia did so, and the individual pushed back the shroud to reveal…

“Soap!” He’d never visited before. It was terribly dangerous for a sootie to be up top. If he were caught, he’d be summarily dismissed without references. Not to mention the fact that Sophronia and Dimity would be ruined.

“What ho, miss? Figured I’d catch you before you left.”

Sophronia wasn’t sure how she felt about this. She had, after all, been avoiding him.

“Sophronia, who is it?” peeped Dimity from the safe confines of their darkened sleeping chamber.

Sophronia went over and stuck her head in. “No one all that important; give me a few minutes, please?”

Dimity’s white face peeked out from under the covers, which she’d pulled up to her chin in case someone untoward tried to see her. “Must you receive callers in such a state of disrepair?”

“I’ll be quick.”

“Who is it, then?” Dimity pressed.

“Just a friend.” Sophronia wanted to avoiding explaining Soap to Dimity. Dimity was bound to come over with a surfeit of disapproval.

Dimity sighed, but there was no way she was leaving her bed to meet an unknown entity.

Sophronia shut the door, took a deep breath to steady her nerves, and turned to face the sootie.

Soap was standing awkwardly in the middle of the parlor, the cowl pushed down to drape about his shoulders. It was made of ripped gunnysack.

“Do sit down?” said Sophronia politely, with an elegant gesture designed to disarm the intruder with politeness, as Lady Linette had once instructed.

“I won’t, miss, thank you kindly. I’ll only smudge up all your pretty little seatlings.”

Sophronia stayed where she was for a moment, on the far side of the room. Then decided she would risk proximity for greater privacy in speech, in case Dimity was listening at keyholes. So she went over and sat, looking up at him expectantly.

“Well?”

“I scared you off, miss, didn’t I? This last time. Should’ve known I was too blunt. Even you’ve got some finer feelings.”

Sophronia’s pride was stung. “You most certainly did not scare me! And I’ve plenty of finer feelings, thank you very much. I was ashamed of my behavior, shouldn’t have yelled.”

Soap grinned, wide and cheerful. “I’m glad you did. Shows you care.”

“Of course I do!”

“So you’re avoiding me because you came over all lily-livered, afraid I’ll chuck a little affection your way?”

Sophronia glared at him. “I’m not frightened of you, Soap. I simply don’t think of you that way, and I don’t want to.”

“I know.” The tall boy managed to look both hurt and shamefaced. “It’s just, miss, that I wish… I…”

He stammered, unsure for once, and Sophronia took it as an opportunity to leap hastily in. “And I wish you would please stop showing me so much affection.” If he said anything more, *she’d* have to say more, and then she was sure to lose his friendship forever. So she hurriedly switched the

subject. “What are you doing outside of engineering?”

“Couldn’t let you go groundside smoldering like to choke with disapproval.”

“I am not smoldering!” she said, looking as if smoke might start to come out her ears, as it did Bumbersnoot’s when he was excited.

Soap smiled, but it was not his usual broad grin. “No, I can see that. You’re catching a train in the wee hours?”

“No, Mumsy is sending the cart. An undignified way to travel, but it’ll get us there. And Roger is an old chum.”

Soap’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Well, I’ll be off, then. Don’t go dancing more than three with that Felix blighter.”

Sophronia sniffed. “I’m not a complete idiot, to be trapped so easily. Nor, for that matter, is he. It’s most annoying of you to order me to do something I’m going to do anyway. Now it’ll look like I’m obeying you!”

Soap shifted the cowl back over his head and let himself out. “Wasn’t an order, miss, only a request.”

“You could have fooled me!”

“Now I’ve gone and offended you again.”

“You have. And things used to be so jolly between us.”

Soap looked down at her, his eyes bright sparkles from the depths of the gunnysack. “Even a crafty little thing like you can’t change the inevitable.”

Sophronia’s mouth firmed and she got a distinct glint of determination in her eye. It was an expression most had learned to be wary of. Not Soap, though. “We’ll see about that.”

Unexpectedly, Soap laughed. “Only you, miss, would try to stop us all from growing up.” With that he skulked off down the hallway.

Sophronia was left thinking the whole encounter very odd.

She made her way back to bed, fortunately not having to explain anything to Dimity—her friend was fast asleep.

Sophronia’s mother sent the pony cart with Roger and another stable hand to act as escort. It wasn’t a stylish means of transport. Preshea would tease them mercilessly if she found out. However, Dimity and Sophronia were off school grounds before Preshea was even awake. Most everyone on board was dead to the world at six a.m., at which entirely uncivilized hour

Sophronia and Dimity caught the goods lift groundside. They clutched sandwich boxes and flasks of tea—necessary sustenance for the long journey ahead.

Bundled in oiled mackintoshes, with hatboxes and carpetbags full of ball gowns tucked under for protection, the two young ladies were the last to arrive.

Roger and compatriot sat on the front box. Both were shrouded head to toe against the bitter cold and ceaseless drizzle. Roger gave them a limp wave of greeting. He looked thoroughly miserable. He'd have driven half the night to collect them all so early. The other stable hand had his nose buried in a dirty handkerchief and didn't even look up.

Inside the cart, nearest the driver's box, sat Pillover, Dimity's younger brother and escort to the ball. It was embarrassing to bring one's brother for a dance partner, but it was the best she could do at short notice. Any finer feelings between her and Lord Dingleproops had been crushed under the weight of a Pickleman-driven misunderstanding. *All the better for it*, thought Sophronia, who didn't like Lord Dingleproops, and not solely because of his reluctant chin and Pickleman leanings.

She did, however, like Pillover. He was a morose sort, a general failure at most aspects of life, particularly—to his great trial—at being both evil and a genius. Pillover could invent things, and he wasn't stupid, he was simply too nice. This was a shortcoming he found depressing.

He grunted at them, having long since elected to treat Sophronia as he did his sister, with a lack of deference and mild splats of brotherly affection.

Sitting as far away from Pillover as possible was Felix Golborne, Viscount Mersey. There was no love lost between the two boys. Sophronia was under the impression that this was mainly because Pillover was younger, practically middle class, and not a member of the Pistons. Felix was the oldest son of a very prominent family, a full Piston in bad standing, and deliciously sinister. The Pistons were a club of sorts, members of which distinguished themselves via fancy waistcoats, black eyeliner, and Pickleman politics. Although currently Lord Mersey looked more damp and disgruntled than anything else, the kohl about his eyes having run to form sad rivulets down his cheeks. His bronze-beribboned top hat was sagging. Sophronia could feel her cheeks flush. This transport was miles beneath his dignity, and to have him sit waiting in the rain… How would she ever live it

down?

Piston or not, Viscount Mersey was still a gentleman. Noting their approach, he jumped down to assist them. His expensive black boots became all over splattered.

“Miss Temminnick, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, delightful to see you both. It has been too long.” He tipped his hat. The hat dripped on him.

Dimity blushed becomingly. Sophronia mastered her embarrassment enough to smile apologetically. “Good morning, Lord Mersey, terrible weather, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say!” His voice had dropped since she’d last seen him, and he was taller by a good few inches. He didn’t tower over her the way Soap did, but he was exactly the right height to dance well.

Lord Mersey assisted Dimity first.

“Good morning, Pustule,” she greeted her brother affectionately.

“Hoy up, Fatty?” was his gloomy response. Pillover was certain to be even more grumpish than usual. His customary occupation when traveling was to bury his nose in a book, but it was raining too much to read in the open cart.

“Agatha not with you?” he asked.

Dimity blinked at him. It was not like Pillover to distinguish between females, let alone ask after one.

“What? I like Agatha. She’s no fuss and doesn’t chirrup on. Unlike some people I know.” Pillover huffed.

“She’s well. I’ll tender your regards, shall I, brother dear?”

“No need to fuss.”

Dimity sat next to him, bumping his shoulder with hers. Then, showing some modicum of delicacy, she dropped the subject. They began to talk softly of family and friends. This was a stratagem on Dimity’s part to allow Sophronia private time to reacquaint herself with Felix.

Roger slouched, watching the aristocrats settle into as much comfort as was afforded under the circumstances. Then, at Sophronia’s nod, he clicked the pony into a brisk walk.

Sophronia, laboring under the guilt of such incommodious transport, opened the conversation consciously at a disadvantage. Lady Linette would have been shocked. “I do beg your pardon, my lord, for this. Carts are challenging, even on the best sort of day. The family carriage, please

understand, was required to ferry Ephraim's intended from the station. Mumsy does so wish to make a good impression."

"Advantageous match, is it?" suggested Felix, the implication being it would take quite a bit to outrank him in worthiness of a carriage. Which was true.

"Indeed it is. Did I not write on it?"

"Little of the particulars. Never you mind, it's a novel experience, this trap thing. My father tells me that soon such transports will be entirely obsolete, and private steam locomotives the thing."

"Oh, do you think that likely? They would have to lay tracks practically everywhere."

"I think our reliance on mechanicals should organically lead to ever more mechanical transport outside the home, don't you?"

It was a little shocking that a duke's son should be versed in rural matters and goods transport. "Yes, I suppose that would be efficient. It will be sad to see the countryside so scarred."

"So said many townships when the railroads were constructed, and now look how far they have taken us. Wouldn't you rather we had the option, now, for example, of a fast closed conveyance to one's home?"

"Indeed I should." Sophronia was disposed not to argue with the boy right off. She was more nervous than she ought to be, at this reacquaintance. She had forgotten how blue Felix's eyes were. He also had this adorable lock of hair that seemed compelled, in the rain, to fall down over his forehead. Unfortunately, his conversational deviation did not bode well for their relationship, such as it was. When Felix and the boys had traveled with them into London almost a year ago, he had been almost obstreperously intimate with her. His flirting had been blunt to the point of rudeness, designed to unsettle. He had stated outright he intended to court her, even with all the obstacles of family, school affiliation, and politics. This, on the other hand, was an overly proper conversation, as if they were surrounded by polite society, or being monitored by parents.

Perhaps I was right, he really isn't interested in me anymore. Sophronia nibbled her lip in aggravation. She didn't realize that little gesture of nervousness did more to endear her to the young man than anything Lady Linette might teach.

"Your family seems most complicated, my dear Ria."

Well, *that* was reassuring; he still utilized her pet name. At first she had hated his assumption of affection, but now, uncertain of his interest, she found it comforting. She shifted a little closer to him on the bench of the cart.

"There are an awful lot of us. Eight at last count," she said.

"Goodness, your mother must be exhausted."

"So she says, most of the time. Often claiming we will be the death of her. But she can hardly complain. She would keep going having children and most unwisely ended with twins. Silly of her. Should have stopped with me, it would have made a world of difference."

Felix ruminated. "But then, how much more of a bother, between six and eight?"

Sophronia nodded. "I suspect that was Father's argument. He seems happiest under a pile of children. Pity, as he works so hard away from home most of the time."

"He *works*?"

"Only for the government. He's home during the hunting season!" Ministry was the only allowable occupation for the gentry, and Sophronia wanted it quite clear that her father was a *gentleman*. Felix's family might be on the rolls and extremely toffy-nosed, but there had been Temminnicks in Wiltshire for as long as Felix's father, the Duke of Golborne, had held his seat, possibly longer. Sophronia's family did not rank Felix's, but they were just as old, thank you very much!

"So Ephraim is the eldest?" Felix continued, trying to get her family straight.

"He's the eldest boy, there's two sisters above him, Nigella and Octavia. Then another brother after him, that's Gresham. He's at Oxford making *something* of himself. Then comes the horrible Petunia, you'll meet her right off. She's still at home and bound to set her cap at you. Then there's me, I'm the final girl. And after me come the two repulsive younger brothers, Humphrey and Hudibras."

Felix looked properly gobsmacked. "Quite the mouthful."

"You should hear what Father named the dogs. Frankly, he goes a little overboard."

"Gracious me."

Sophronia giggled. "Ephraim would come home from Oxford on

holiday, and Father used to yell for all of us by name, and both beagles, before he got ’round to Ephraim. I expect it’ll be the same with me now that I’ve been away. Nigella’s been married for simply ages and she’s off the recitation completely. Sometimes I think Father doesn’t remember she exists. She netted the rather well-regarded Dr. Chillingsrymple, have you heard of him?”

Felix shook his head so Sophronia prattled on. “Publishes papers on the probable medical effects of aetheric travel.”

Dimity and Pillover were arguing vociferously, as only siblings can, over something utterly inconsequential—like the nature of applesauce. Roger was stolidly facing forward, the road having turned into a bit of river and requiring all his attention. Roger’s companion occasionally glanced back at them, but it was with the attitude of one who checks on packages to ensure they are all still inside the transport. Once or twice, Sophronia suspected him of snorting, but it was impossible to see his face.

Sophronia knew she was talking overmuch, like a real schoolgirl rather than one who was trained to flirt and should know better. But Felix’s constant banalities were making her increasingly nervous. Chattering was Dimity’s trait, but Sophronia seemed to have picked up on it, at least with Felix. He didn’t appear to mind, asking encouraging questions and learning all about her family. He must not have siblings of his own.

They continued on in the vein of polite conversation for almost an hour. Sophronia would never before have thought how unsettling it would be to find that this unsettling young man was no longer intentionally trying to unsettle her!

Then, changeable and sudden, Lord Mersey pushed his dripping hair out of his face and lowered his voice. “How are you *really*, Ria? Your letters are so impersonal.”

Sophronia was relieved, honest interest at last! So relieved, in fact, she was a tad unguarded in her response. “As are yours! I searched between the lines for some indication of significance, and yet there was nothing.”

“I’m no great letter writer. Besides which, you gave me no encouragement!” Felix’s eyes flashed in indignation.

Sophronia bit her lip, both delighted and terrified that she still had his affection. “We have not yet learned how to write letters with purpose.”

The boy calmed and his voice became a purr. “Have you learned how to

do other things with purpose?" Felix often reminded Sophronia of a cat, always stalking something, seeming bored with life, and then the pounce, a flash of claw, and the thrill of a hunt.

Sophronia felt on safer ground now that he was flirting. "Lady Linette has been teaching us seduction techniques." She lowered her eyes and then looked off across the gray moor, presenting him with her profile, which was rather a nice one, or so Mademoiselle Geraldine told her.

That statement successfully shocked Felix. He swallowed a few times before saying, his voice almost as high as it had been a year ago, "Really?"

"Oh, yes indeed. Would you like me to show you? I could use the practice on a real man."

This time he actually squeaked. "That might be nice."

Sophronia demurred, still gazing over the nonexistent view, then said, "We are to start with longing looks."

"Oh, are we?"

With which Sophronia turned toward him and raised her lashes. She stared into his eyes, trying to convey alluring desire. She thought of the time they had last danced together, how Felix's hand had felt at the small of her back, the sweetness of his breath on her neck. She allowed a small smile to play over her lips.

Felix seemed physically paralyzed by her eyes. His own pale-blue ones lost focus. Sophronia noted the remaining kohl about the outside. Daring. One of his endearing foibles. Evil geniuses in training were encouraged to develop eccentricities.

Sophronia let her eyelashes flutter, not too much, only a little.

Felix's breath hitched.

Now, *that* was an interesting reaction.

Sophronia tilted back her head, showing neck. This was a gesture of innocence and vulnerability. It also let the rain trickle right down her décolletage and under her stays, but she mentally gritted her teeth against the discomfort, allowing none of it to show on her face.

Lady Linette would have been proud.

Felix Mersey was well and truly hooked. He leaned in toward her, shifting closer on the bench as though drawn by a magnet.

His voice was so low as to be almost a whisper. "My goodness… Ria."

And then he was bending down, looking as if he might actually kiss her

—in the back of an open cart! With Dimity and Pillover right there! Not to mention the stable lads.

Frightened of her own power *and* of what might happen next, Sophronia broke the look. She lowered her lashes completely and pulled away, offering up her wrist in recompense.

He grabbed her fingers, perhaps too roughly, and pressed his lips into the palm of her hand, kissing up to the small bit of exposed flesh between glove and hurlie strap. Sophronia never went anywhere without her hurlie.

She let him continue to kiss her for a short while, fascinated. It seemed to be some means of coping with an excess of physically manifesting emotion. It was all quite wonderful.

The experiment was spoiled by a scuffle at the front. Everyone's attention was drawn to where Roger's friend seemed to have almost fallen off the driver's box. He righted himself, and Sophronia wondered if the lads had been at the drink, or if he'd simply dozed off.

Before turning back to her escort, Sophronia exchanged a sharp look with Dimity.

Dimity's expression clearly said, *Do you need me to intervene?*

While Sophronia's response was, *Not just yet, thank you. I believe I have it in hand.*

Pillover's said nothing. Dimity took up scolding her brother for some supposed transgression to do with shoe habits. Pillover sneezed, unexcited.

Sophronia returned her attention to Felix, careful not to look into his eyes any longer than etiquette demanded.

The distraction had provided enough time for Felix to recover control.

"God's bones, Ria," he hissed, unacceptable language in front of ladies. Dimity heard and gasped, but Sophronia let it slide on the grounds of extenuating circumstances.

Felix said, "I should have known better than to allow you to practice those wicked lessons on me. You are a sorceress."

Sophronia liked that description very much. "Oh, good. It worked, then?"

He dropped her wrist and rubbed at his face. "You shouldn't do that to a man, not after almost a year of separation and an hour and a half of impersonal conversation at close quarters."

"I shouldn't? Why, was it terrible?"

“No, quite the opposite, too much good all at once. You must be careful with those green sparkles of yours. You know Calypso’s green eyes trapped Odysseus on her island for seven years? I could live in those eyes of yours.”

“I think we’d both find that rather uncomfortable.”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Let’s talk about something else, shall we? How about telling me more of your lessons at that school of yours, outside of seduction class.”

When Sophronia smiled quite wickedly at that, Felix changed his mind. “Maybe that is unsafe, too?”

“Why don’t *you* tell *me* a little of life at Bunson’s? How are the Pistons? How is your father?”

“Oh, now, my father is definitely not a safe topic.”

Sophronia edged in, testing the waters. “Pickleman problems? They do seem overly demanding.”

Felix didn’t take the bait. “Aren’t all worthy causes? You know he still grumbles about your tricks at the Westminster Hive.”

“Indeed? How on earth did you get his leave to come to my brother’s engagement party?”

“Fortunately for me, he doesn’t know your name, so he did not make the connection. He still thinks Lord Akeldama was involved.”

“And you didn’t tell him the truth?” Hope sprang so hard in Sophronia’s chest, she swore she tingled with it. *If he covered for me against the Picklemen, perhaps I can change his mind about them.*

“I claimed one of your other brothers was a friend from my early days at Eton. You know I was at Eton before Bunson’s?”

Sophronia nodded.

“I suspected you probably had some brother who was about the correct age. You seem to be lousy with brothers. We might have been at school at the same time.”

“You’re right. Gresham would have been older than you, but you could have crossed paths.”

“Father won’t look into it thoroughly. He’s been distracted recently. He’d check the name Temminnick and not a whole lot else. Whatever your father does for the government, it obviously does not impede Pickleman policies. So I’m allowed to attend.”

Felix’s father, Duke Golborne, was something terribly high up in the

Picklemen as well as a peer. The Picklemen were, so far as Sophronia could tell, evil. Not that there was anything especially *wrong* with being evil. But this evil seemed particularly centered on monopolizing political control and undermining everyone else's power but their own, and that Sophronia didn't like. She was finding, as she grew older, that she was rather fond of balance… in all things. "Oh, indeed. And what has been *distracting* the duke of late?"

"Now, now, Ria, you think I don't remember that look of yours?"

"What look?"

"Not unlike a hound on a scent. A very pretty hound, of course."

Sophronia sighed. "I know, it's my worst giveaway. I'm mostly good at schooling my features for anger and love and suchlike emotions, but curiosity gets the better of me."

Felix, clearly thinking of Sophronia and Sidheag's spectacular rescue infiltration of the Westminster Hive, added sarcastically, "I should say that it does so in more ways than one."

"Now, now, my lord, you know it's part of my charm."

Felix looked as if he doubted it. "You do wear breeches well."

"They are comfortable and mobile. Why should you boys have all the fun?"

"Next thing you'll have me in stays."

Sophronia was surprised to find she rather liked that idea. She thought Felix would look well in a corset, perhaps a black-and-blue one to match his eyes and hair. "Would you like to try? You might fit one of Sidheag's."

Felix actually blushed. "Oh, now, I say!"

"It was only an offer."

Their conversation remained a great deal livelier after that, ranging on topics of interest both evil genius and finishing related. Sophronia even successfully teased him about Pickleman politics, and he looked as if he might have been second-guessing the Picklemen's interests. Or at least actually thinking about the implications. Eventually, they moved toward the front of the cart to include Dimity and even Pillover in their conversation. The boys managed to put any animosity aside for the duration of the trip. It helped that tea and sandwiches plus hard-boiled eggs and winter apples were consumed. It was hard to be antagonistic over the comfort of food on a rainy day.

Masquerading Mechanicals

It was a pleasant trip, in the end, despite the weather and the conveyance. They arrived at Sophronia's family estate early that evening. It was too late for tea, although Frowbritcher, the mechanical butler, laid out a reserve for the weary travelers.

The engagement party was Mrs. Temminnick's opportunity to exhibit her hostess technique. With eight children, thrift was a matter of course, but this was her *eldest son* and no expense was to be spared. There were floating lanterns ready to launch as soon as the sun set. There were freight carriers full of goods and errand boys on donkeys arriving at an alarming rate. Sophronia was relieved to see that there were no cheese pies. Mumsy had borrowed extra mechanical staff from the neighbors as well. Sophronia spotted six clangermaids and two buttlinger models of the latest design, certainly not belonging to her family. Frowbritcher, who ordinarily had the most regal of bearings, as it were, seemed shabby next to the shiny new technology. Extra tracks had been laid down in the public areas of the house, crisscrossing the sitting room and card parlor and bordering the ballroom in artful waving patterns.

After tea, the girls and boys separated to change for the main event. Pillover and Felix were bound to be quicker and so were instructed to attend the other gentlemen in the billiard room once their toilette was complete. The young ladies were put in with Sophronia's sisters, a milling, giggling throng of primping and gossip.

All attention instantly turned to Sophronia and Dimity, much to

Petunia's annoyance. Petunia was Sophronia's nearest older sister and, in consequence, a trial.

"Oh, Sophronia, is it true?" asked one of Petunia's silly friends.

"Of course it's true, isn't it always," replied Sophronia, depositing her shawl and sundry unnecessary luggage in a pile on a settee. Bumbersnoot, lost under the mounds, seemed content to stay quiet. Dimity put her assorted garments on top.

Petunia bustled over, clucking. "What on earth has happened to your hair, sister?"

"I traveled all day in an open cart in the rain!" Sophronia snapped.

Petunia always treated Sophronia as if she were still ten. At Dimity's startled look, Sophronia realized she was usually better at holding her temper, and took a deep breath, reaching for her training. She would outclass her sister if it killed her.

Petunia continued to cluck and fuss. Soon a gaggle of girls joined her, attacking Sophronia's flattened locks with curlers and rags, pins and puffs, falls and flowers. Sophronia stood composed under their siege. Of course, she knew what they wanted of her, but she was not going to make it easy. She allowed them to guide her to a chair in front of a looking glass without offer of information.

Dimity, ignored, drifted to a corner and popped open her carpetbag to extract her costume. It was a modification of her favorite gold ball gown. She'd ordered a new evening bodice for it and added crystals about the neckline in a gearlike pattern. The shape of the skirt, paired with copious gold jewelry, including an ornate tiara, made her look like the queen of mechanicals. It was a lovely effect with her pale complexion and riotous curls—Dimity did not need the benefit of curling tongs. Having donned a smooth mechanical-like mask, she looked enchanting, entirely guileless, and completely trustworthy. She had learned well how to manipulate with clothing. There was something so unthreatening about household mechanicals. Dimity had managed to trade on that fact and still look regal. Sophronia wished she could carry off such a costume.

Sophronia let her sister's friends fuss. Only she knew that her hair was destined to be scraped back into a severe bun. Best let them have their fun. Behind the group, on the settee, Bumbersnoot awakened. Their pile of garments was weaving erratically. Sophronia drew attention away from him

by answering questions.

“Sophronia, what we want to know is, is it true that you’ve brought two eligible members of the peerage with you?” Petunia had no subtlety.

“Dear sister, that should entirely depend on what you mean by eligible.”

“Stop being coy, young lady.”

There was a vast difference between coy and evasive, and Sophronia dearly wanted to instruct but said instead, “I have brought Viscount Mersey and Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott. So far as I know, neither is affianced. For Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott’s part, you might ask his sister. Although he is still young. Even Lord Mersey has not gained his majority.”

The ladies sighed in disappointment.

Sophronia took that as an opportunity to extract herself from their clutches and rummage through her own carpetbag. She also reached under the mackintosh pile and pulled out Bumbersnoot the reticule.

“Be still, you,” she hissed at him.

“What is that hideous thing?” demanded Petunia.

“Oh, dear sister, don’t you know? This is the very latest in animal-shaped reticules out of Italy. You don’t mean to tell me you are *that* out of touch with the current modes? How sad for you to be trapped in the countryside.”

Petunia said, through her teeth, “Of course I heard of the craze, but I should not think myself so lacking in individuality as to adopt an accessory simply because it is the latest thing in some backwater foreign country!”

“It is the latest thing in London as well, or didn’t you know even that much?” Sophronia was going to run with it. Bumbersnoot, for his part, remained perfectly still, like a good little dog. Although she thought she saw a twinkle of mischief in his jet eyes. She put him carefully under the settee, and then draped a shawl over the edge, as if protecting him from the avarice in the eyes of those around her. It would give Bumbersnoot a chance to explore discreetly.

Sophronia would have wagered her best *robe à transformation* that Petunia wanted nothing so much at that moment as to go to finishing school herself.

The girls around her murmured in distress as Sophronia began to dress.

“You don’t have to wear that, do you?” said one.

Sophronia had begged an old dress from Sister Mattie. It was black and

severe and could be thought a mourning gown, it was so plain. Over the last few weeks she had tailored it into a narrow silhouette, most unfashionable.

“Sophronia, dear, it’s so ugly!” remonstrated Petunia.

Sophronia pulled it on. She looked well in black, and as a young lady with no deaths in the family, she rarely had the opportunity to wear it. It went on easily. Sister Mattie did not employ a lady’s maid, so all of her dresses fastened up the front. But what Sophronia, Dimity, Agatha, and Sidheag had spent their free time doing to that dress was ingenious.

They had cut it in and down at the collar so that Sophronia wore it over a white blouse. Both were low enough, however, to show a goodly amount of cleavage. Sophronia had very nice cleavage and was under orders from Mademoiselle Geraldine to take advantage of it. *One never knows when one might need to hide or distract; décolletage is good for both*. Hers were nothing on Mademoiselle Geraldine’s own considerable assets, but then, whose were? The bodice was tailored all the way to her waist, nipped in further with a wide, stiff leather belt. The effect was almost like a blacksmith’s apron, giving Sophronia a utilitarian, masculine look. The white underskirt was full enough to disguise the fact that it was actually divided down the middle and could act as trousers if necessary. Over this was draped the skirt of the black gown, split up each side so it looked even more apronlike. To it they had sewn multiple pockets in shades of black and gray, in variable sizes, largest and lightest at the bottom, smallest and darkest near the waist, forming a pattern. In those pockets Sophronia had stashed useful objects. Not that she expected trouble, but she had the pockets so she might as well use them.

“Sophronia, what *are* you meant to be?” Petunia was disgusted.

Sophronia pulled out her mask; it was an asymmetrical slash of black lace, like a large smudge. “I’m a sootie, of course.”

The young ladies all gasped. Imagine going to a masquerade as something lower class! There was some muttering about the fact that at least Sophronia wouldn’t be competing for masculine attention.

“Well,” sniffed Petunia, “I suppose we should be glad you didn’t actually don masculine attire.”

Sophronia blinked at her. *Yes, yes you should*. She said, “Oh, dear, do you think this too plain?”

“Of course it’s too plain!”

“I was thinking of your finer feelings, sister dear. I wouldn’t want to distract the gentlemen. After all, I’m not officially out yet. You’re on the market; you should have first crack.”

“Oh, well, that’s very thoughtful, Sophronia.” Petunia fluffed the skirts of her shepherdess outfit, trying not to look pleased by the consideration.

Dimity grinned from behind her mechanical mask.

Sophronia winked at her.

They both knew the truth. The very plainness of Sophronia’s dress would make it stand out in a sea of color. Besides, Sophronia had the figure to carry it off. After a stint at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s, she also had the bearing. Also, the simplicity would make others underestimate her, never a bad thing. Sophronia loved the gown for its practicality and for its nod to her friends belowdecks. Soap would have thought it a great joke. After all, it looked like a feminine version of the apron he wore to shovel coal.

The ball had started, but there was still an hour or more before they could safely go down without being thought desperate. Sophronia and Dimity made their way to the settee corner. Sophronia occupied herself checking the sharpness of her scissors and letter opener and wishing for a bladed fan while relaying softly some of her conversation with Felix in the cart.

Suddenly an excited twittering emanated from the door, opened by a very uncomfortable-looking Pillover. He cleared his throat.

Before he could say anything, Dimity pushed through the crowd to face him. “Pill, you aren’t supposed to *be* here. We’re dressing!”

Pillover grumbled something unintelligible. Dimity nodded. She replied sharply and then shut the door in his face.

The hubbub died down and the young ladies returned to fixing masks and fussing with hair, now accompanied by discussion of Pillover’s finer points. This startled Sophronia and Dimity—who would have thought he had any? Apparently his complexion was considered lovely, and he was a nice height for dancing, and the sullen glumness came off as deliciously mysterious.

“Don’t you want to cuddle and console him? Poor darling, he looks so unhappy,” said one, pulling on long white gloves.

“I wager he’s had his heart broken,” suggested another. She wore the costume of a Greek goddess—swathes of white silk draped over a turquoise

ball gown and large crinoline. She was one of many who had opted for the classics. “I should love to be the one to repair his tortured soul.”

Dimity made her way back to Sophronia, not bothering to advocate for or against her sibling. Pillover would suffer the slings and arrows of willing young ladies without her help. “Pillover needs to talk. Alone. He’s been trying to all along, apparently, but Felix has always been there. I told him to wait in the gazebo. I knew he’d remember it from before.”

The gazebo had been the location of all the fuss with the prototype and Monique the first time Dimity and Pillover had attended a party at the Temminnicks’. It burned down as a result, but Sophronia’s mother had had it rebuilt bigger and better. Sophronia had used the reconstruction to hide her stolen airdinghy. The small aircraft seemed a part of the roof structure, hidden in plain sight like a basket figurehead on top.

Sophronia looked around at the excited young ladies. “We’ll never escape unseen. Too many people at too close quarters.”

Dimity nodded. “I think he mainly needs to talk to you. I’ll create a distraction. If the message was meant for both of us, he’d have told me himself while you were flirting with Felix. It’ll be easier for you to get around with all the borrowed mechanicals. In that outfit you might be taken as staff, so long as you avoid family.”

Sophronia reached below the settee, grabbed Bumbersnoot, and shoved him under the throw rug in one corner of the room with an encouraging “Go ahead.”

Bumbersnoot began to explore, a moving lump under the carpet.

“There’s your distraction. You can keep him safe?”

Dimity smiled. “In this crowd? Of course. Most of them will faint, and the others are silly.”

It was a fair assessment. “Yet you still want to be one of them?”

“It’s not the deceit I object to, Sophronia dear, it’s the danger.”

With which Dimity made her way to the settee. For a short moment she stared fixedly at the rug where the Bumbersnoot lump moved. Then she threw her head back and shrieked at the top of her lungs. “Rat! Eeeeeek!” With which she hopped up onto the settee, upending the mound of discarded clothing onto the floor and on top of poor Bumbersnoot once more. “Eeek! There it goes, get it! Eeeeeee!”

Without even seeing the alleged rat themselves, the girls in that corner of

the room all fainted. Those near to a couch or chair got up on top of it, screaming themselves. This proved challenging on the cushier furniture and with longer skirts. One or two fell over; a few pushed others off in order to gain the high ground. This caused more shrieks. Still others cried out in sympathy, for the sake of exacerbating the hysteria. The chaos was instant and intense. With all attention on Dimity, Sophronia slid out into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

After a year and a half of ghosting about a finishing school for intelligencers, a place riddled with tracks and malevolent mechanicals of all kinds, she found her own house easy by comparison. Most of the human staff were already downstairs attending to early guests and dressed gentlemen. A few mechanicals trundled along, under orders, none of them equipped with proximity alarms or remotely interested in Sophronia. She belonged here; why should it matter that she was out and about?

Her parents and sundry older siblings were already at the ball. Petunia was upstairs screaming at Bumbersnoot, so there was only the twins to worry about. They must be off causing mischief for her mother, as Sophronia made it through the house and out into the garden without attracting attention. Or perhaps she had learned more than she thought at Mademoiselle Geraldine's.

"I have a message from Lady Kingair," said Pillover, without the courtesy of a greeting. He was slouching on a rail of the gazebo, plucking dolefully at a camellia bush.

Sophronia respected brevity. "I was hoping someone might."

"I'm the best and most trustworthy option of a bad lot, I suppose."

Sophronia held out her hand.

Pillover shook his head. "Naw, it came via Vieve, verbal only. Too dangerous to keep written, scamp said."

Sophronia flipped up her hand, looking about to make absolutely certain they were enjoying complete privacy. A few stable hands walked toward the front of the house from the barn. Carriages were beginning to arrive. They were out of earshot. Above them the basket of Sophronia's misappropriated airdinghy nested comfortably. Someone could hide in there, she supposed. Quickly she pulled out her letter opener and jabbed through the wicker of the gondola. No one screamed and there was no blood, although Pillover watched her do this with mild disgust.

Sophronia jumped back down and nodded at him to continue. She stashed her letter opener.

Pillover said, “Sidheag says her werewolves are in trouble. Kingair Pack has been disgraced.” Pillover looked as if he had swallowed something unpleasant. “They were caught planning to murder Queen Victoria. Lord Maccon has abandoned them and is contemplating challenging Lord Woolsey to take over the pack near London.”

“Oh, my goodness!” said Sophronia. “Treason?”

“Attempted treason.”

“*And* Alpha abandonment.” Sophronia could understand the Laird of Kingair’s anger, but it put everyone at risk. A werewolf pack without an Alpha could be very dangerous. Quickly, she calculated the next full moon. Right ’round the corner; without an Alpha, the pack’s madness could be particularly brutal. “I hope the clavigers are ready.”

Pillover continued, “Sidheag has gone to London to intercept Lord Maccon, try to turn him back to his duty. He’s needed to keep the Kingair Pack in order, especially now. Seems his Beta planned it all and Lord Maccon killed him before heading south.”

Kingair had no Alpha *and* no Beta? Sophronia paled. She’d never heard of such a thing in the whole history of openly accepted supernaturals. *Who is controlling the pack? They could run mad*. Every one of those werewolves was an uncle to Sidheag; this would account for her upset. Her one and only family was fractured beyond all possible repair. This was the werewolf version of those unspeakable divorces so popular on the Continent! “Poor Sidheag! What are we to do?”

Pillover shrugged, sublimely unconcerned. Or perhaps he always expected bad news and thus was never surprised by it. “I’m only the messenger.”

Further discussion was stopped by a whip crack of a cry. “Ho there, young man!”

Pillover jumped away from Sophronia, barking his elbow on the gazebo railing. “Ouch!”

Sophronia turned to face the house. “Mumsy!”

“Sophronia Angelina Temminnick, what are you doing alone in the garden with a *boy*!”

“Um,” said Sophronia.

Pillover rubbed his elbow.

Mrs. Temminnick turned her wrath on the unfortunate young man. “Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott, this is too bad! I am shocked, shocked, I say. After we welcomed you into our home last winter! I trust you will make an honest woman of my daughter?”

“Mother! Pillover is *only* fourteen!”

“Oh ho, *Pillover*, is it? What have they been teaching you at finishing school? To meet a young man in the gardens, alone and unchaperoned…”

“Really, Mother! He is a veritable hobbledehoy. Don’t be silly.”

“Oh, thank you for that,” muttered Pillover, utterly dejected. Which fortunately made him seem less threatening.

Sophronia said smoothly, “My school has trained me to recognize when a young man offers no risk. He is my dearest friend’s younger brother. I asked him to see me ’round the garden. I was feeling most unwell after that cart ride, and the rain has abated somewhat.”

“Don’t you dare talk back, young lady!” Mrs. Temminnick looked at Pillover with new eyes. He did seem as if he could barely muster enough energy to hold his own head up, let alone menace her daughter. It obviously took great effort for him to speak to, let alone kiss, a lady. There was clearly no threat to her daughter’s reputation, aside from the fact that they had been caught alone together. Mrs. Temminnick checked to see if anyone else had noticed. No one had. Still, the value of having her youngest daughter trussed up at only sixteen?

Sophronia perfectly followed her mother’s thought process. “Mumsy, the ball is to start soon; everyone must be looking for you. If you leave quickly, Pill and I will return separately, with no one the wiser.”

Mrs. Temminnick wasn’t going to let them get away that easily. “I will be looking into the Plumleigh-Teignmott family. If Mr. Temminnick thinks them suitable, we will arrange the match. I know what is happening here, daughter, even if you are both too young. I demand an *understanding*. Do you understand, Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott?”

Pillover shrugged, which was his response to everything.

Sophronia blinked. “If you insist.” There was no point in arguing further at the moment.

Shortly thereafter, Sophronia slid back into the dressing room full of primping ladies. No one had noticed her absence.

“Well?” hissed Dimity. “How’d it go?”

“You were right, Sidheag had a message for me. Although I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with the information.” She quickly relayed the bulk of Pillover’s communications.

Dimity was suitably appalled. “Treason *and* murder? Lord Maccon’s abandonment is totally understandable, of course. To conspire against the queen is to conspire against the Alpha.”

Sophronia nodded. It was the stitching that kept the fabric of an integrated society together. Supernatural leaders, in their way, were Queen Victoria’s strong arm. To betray her was to betray them. Sidheag was the one who’d taught them that very fact. “Anything else, dare I ask?”

“Yes, unfortunately, I seem to have gotten myself secretly engaged to your brother.”

Dimity raised her eyebrows. “Oh, dear. Although I should like to have you for a sister-in-law, of course.”

Sophronia glared at her.

“Well, yes, Pillover is *perfectly* ghastly. But does that really matter? He’d make an amenable husband. You could do whatever you liked, take any patron you wanted. Secretly run the empire as Her Majesty’s Mistress Intelligencer and he’d never notice. So long as you kept him well supplied with bacon and books.”

Sophronia smiled. “I suppose we could play with it for a while. But I will have to find a nice way to jilt him, eventually.”

Dimity sighed and twirled her mask. “Of course you will. But it will be fun to torture Pillover in the interim.”

Sophronia’s smile turned into a grin. “Not to mention Felix Mersey.”

Dimity’s eyes sparkled. “My, yes!”

So it was that Sophronia attended her brother’s engagement masquerade secretly engaged herself. Mrs. Temminnick insisted Pillover be Sophronia’s escort and take the first dance. A very surprised Lord Mersey was forced to lead in Dimity. Thus paired, they undertook the opening quadrille with great discomfort on the part of everyone, except perhaps Sophronia, who was starting to view it all as a joke. She flirted shamelessly with Pillover, who told her to stop it in tones of such abject misery she almost pitied him.

The ball was certainly up to snuff. Sophronia felt proudly that it was good enough to impress even a man of Felix's standing. Preshea would have found flaws, but it was a vast improvement on last year's ball. The masquerade dresses were divine. The masks were varied, and Ephraim looked ridiculously happy dancing with his fluff of a bride-to-be. She was a pretty, jolly sort. It was impossible to determine her costume, with so many layers of white and pink. Sophronia settled on cupcake.

She recognized most everyone in attendance, even with masks. After all, the society afforded by the local gentry was not varied. There were a few unknown young ladies, friends of the bride, and a gaggle of older folk of a similar jolly roundness that suggested familial relations. Behind them stood a tall young man who held himself beautifully, if a little stiffly, wearing a full mask of black velvet and a wig of a style popular some hundred years ago among the French nobility. His costume matched the wig, complete with velvet coat and satin breeches of dark silver, and waistcoat and gloves of bloodred. He reminded Sophronia of her vampire friend, Lord Akeldama. Had the vampire sent her a message via drone? The young man did seem intent on watching her movements. This when there were a number of young ladies without partners who might benefit from his attentions.

In and around the glittering throng, the extra mechanical staff trundled, bearing trays of enticing nibbles. The mechanicals were also dressed for the occasion. These were not the faceless utilitarian creatures of Mademoiselle Geraldine's, but proper household issue, with shiny—if impassive—metal faces. They blended nicely with all the masks. Dimity could be seen posing with one or another as they passed, for her costume was much admired. The mechanicals all wore small black evening cravats or crisp white aprons. Their protocols were simple and they moved smoothly from crowd to dumbwaiter and back, engaged in a dance of their own.

Felix demanded an explanation the moment they began to waltz. He was dressed as a particularly handsome jester, his mask so small as to be a mere nod to the theme. Sophronia contemplated playing coquette but decided that would be cruel. Felix seemed genuinely enamored, and she didn't want to hurt him. So she explained that Pillover had needed to deliver a message from a friend and that they had been caught in the garden together.

Felix found the whole thing amusing. "Would you like to walk out into the gardens with me, Ria, my heart? I could arrange to get us caught."

Sophronia twinkled up at him. Her heart fluttered at the idea of a nighttime stroll with such a handsome boy. *I could practice some other bits of seduction class*. “Oh, now, my dear lord, I think that might be jumping from toast fork into fire. You are far more dangerous a proposition for me, and far more desirable a prospect to my mother. I should think you would wish to be more discreet.”

“For you, my Ria, I would sacrifice my reputation.”

“Now, now, Lord Mersey, you are perfectly aware that you would be sacrificing *mine*.”

He whirled her into an elaborate twist. He danced divinely, his frame always a little too intimate but not enough to shock the chaperones. The hand at her back was warm and supportive; the one clutching hers to lead was direct and assertive. He looked into her eyes in a melting manner, but only long enough to let her know he was interested and not so long as to lose track of the others around them. He could have been a dance instructor had he not been born the son of a duke.

A duke who would see all vampires and werewolves dead. Sophronia tore herself away from his blue eyes to find she was the object of envious glances from nearly every young lady there.

“Felix, my dear, do me a favor after this dance?”

“Anything for you,” he said, rather unguardedly. Then quickly, “You aren’t going to leave me to finish the set alone, are you?” There was real fear in his voice; twice Sophronia had abandoned him in the middle of a dance.

“Not tonight, I hope. No one I know has been kidnapped, and the prototype is beyond my control.”

Felix tilted his head. “Indeed it is, as it should be. It was the Picklemen’s by right. Ours by right. Not something for you to worry that pretty head about.”

Sophronia wanted to argue that point, but midwaltz was not the time; besides, she liked it when Felix underestimated her. More room to maneuver. “Mmmm. No, I was going to ask… My sister Petunia is there, the one dressed as the fluffy shepherdess? Dance with her next, would you? Otherwise she’ll never forgive me.”

Felix looked over, winced a tiny bit, then said gallantly, “Of course. It would be my pleasure.”

“Oh, thank you.” Sophronia nearly slipped up and applied another longing glance at that juncture, she was so grateful.

Felix noticed and leaned in. “Careful, my sweet, we are in a public place. All eyes are upon us. And you are affianced to another.”

That made her smile again.

The dance was nearly finished when the tall, stiff young man dressed as a vintage dandy appeared at Felix’s elbow.

“If I may?” he said, insinuating himself between them like oil into a mechanical and dexterously depriving Felix of Sophronia.

Sophronia had never been removed from a dance partner before, although she had been trained for it. Felix certainly had never had anyone dare to cut in on him! At a loss, he bowed out politely. He was angry, though. There was a good chance that he, like Sophronia, was thinking of Lord Akeldama when he saw this man’s costume. And Felix did not like vampires.

The dandy guided her, clumsily it must be admitted, through the final refrain of the waltz. He relaxed noticeably at the end and whisked her to the punch bowl, taking proprietary control of her dance card so that she could not find her next partner. As it happened, she had no partner. She was, after all, not out, and could really only dance with her escort or her brothers.

Sophronia glared at him, waiting for some kind of sign.

“You’re awfully friendly with that young man,” said a horribly familiar voice from behind the velvet mask.

“Soap!” hissed Sophronia, backing them both away from the punch and into a corner behind a potted plant. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Swilling punch with the aristocracy. Keeping an eye on you.”

“I can take care of myself!”

“Not from what I hear. Rumor around the floor is that you got yourself engaged!”

“Oh ho, trust you to be in on the gossip.”

“The ladies like me, what can I say? What do you have to say for yourself?” He was glaring at Felix, who held court across the crowded ballroom and raised his glass at them in a challenging, cocky way.

Soap inclined his head.

Sophronia could almost feel the sharpness of Felix’s glare.

Sophronia was convinced these two shouldn’t encounter each other

when Soap was pretending to be a gentleman. Dueling might result.

“Silly Soap, it’s not to Felix. Mumsy has decided to engage me to Pillover.”

“What?” That took the coal out of Soap’s boiler.

“Misunderstanding.”

“I should hope so. He’s a child.”

“Sadly, he doesn’t look like it anymore.”

Soap stopped staring angrily at Felix and turned to follow Pillover’s slouched form as he led an excited lady through a reel in a competent—if desultory—manner. The young woman clearly thought he was *the* most wonderful thing.

“Oh, dear,” said Soap.

“Who knew Pillover would turn into a lady-killer?”

“Who *indeed*?” Soap could do a fair imitation of an upper-crust accent when he put his mind to it.

If Sophronia hadn’t been so annoyed with him for putting himself in danger, she might have said something complimentary on this subject. “I think it’s the general air of bleakness and dyspepsia; women want to save him and administer good cheer.”

“Poor old Pillover.”

As if knowing he was the object of their discussion, Pillover spotted them lurking behind the palm and, with an air of desperation, began to bend his set in their direction. Felix extracted himself from a flock of eager young ladies and desperate mamas and circled in on their location as well.

Sophronia panicked. “Soap, you have to get out of here! You haven’t been invited. What if someone finds out who you are? I’m sure there’s a law against it. You could be cashiered or whatever it is they do upon encountering unsanctioned mixing of the classes.”

“I thought my accent was rather good!”

“Soap, and I don’t mean to be rude, but you do *know* you are of African descent, don’t you? What if your mask slips?”

Soap shrugged. “I like your costume, miss. You look a treat, almost like you was one of us down below.”

“You’re impossible! Why, I… Wait a moment. You were Roger’s friend, on the box! How did I not know it was you?”

“I bundled completely up and I slouched so you wouldn’t recognize my

posture. And I stayed quiet so you wouldn't know my voice."

"How did you persuade Roger to go along?"

Soap grinned. "You think I don't have just as many tricks as you, for all your education?"

That was fair; he had taught Sophronia a whole mess of dirty fighting techniques.

"Who are you? You upstart poodle faker!" demanded Felix, interposing himself between Soap and Sophronia in an overbearing white knight way.

Sophronia was instantly annoyed. Felix should know she was perfectly capable of dealing with things!

"That is none of your concern," replied Soap, sounding even more the toff, his speech patterns influenced by Felix's upper-crust accent.

"Oh, now, if you are focusing in on *my* lady here, I should *make* it my concern."

"Ho there!" said Sophronia, in a low hiss, attempting to get both young men to lower their voices and not cause a scene. "I'm no one's lady, thank you kindly. Despite what my mother thinks."

The boys ignored her, squaring off rather like two hounds after the same smelly old carcass.

"Oh, really," said Sophronia, annoyed at being ignored. "I'm not really important in this situation, am I? You two simply wish to bicker."

This was probably unfair to Felix, who didn't recognize Soap. *Where did Soap get such an outlandish outfit?* Felix would consider a sootie so far beneath him as to be unworthy as a rival, if he knew.

Soap, on the other hand, had taken an active dislike to the young viscount the moment Felix entered Sophronia's life.

Things might have gotten quite out of hand, except that Pillover pulled up, panting. "Oh, Sophronia, thank goodness. Save me? Please? All those young girls, in pastels, talking about the weather. I shall go jump off a bridge, I swear I shall. Do you have bridges in Wiltshire? They chatter, they chatter worse than Dimity ever did. Oh, the chattering! The chattering, it haunts me."

That broke the tension.

Felix looked at Pillover as if he were some yappy dog.

Soap chuckled.

"Well," said Pillover truculently, "if we're secretly engaged, she's

obliged to save me."

Sophronia did not want to leave Soap and Felix together. "Oh, Pill, I really would like to help, but we seem to be in the middle of some kind of whose-top-hat-is-the-biggest contest."

Pillover looked between the two young men in question. "Well, I don't know who you are, sir," he addressed Soap, "although I respect the courage of a man who wears satin breeches *that* tight, but in the end you'll have to cede to Lord Mersey. He's too much of a peer, you understand? And a bit of a prick as well."

"Pillover!" gasped Sophronia.

"Well, he is. Girls never see it, but it's true. All I'm saying is, he's going to win no matter what you do, stranger. So you might as well give up."

Felix looked as if he had been given some kind of caped weasel—part gift, part insult, part utter confusion. "Thank you, I think."

Pillover glared at him. "Pistons! Trouble, the lot of you. Now that's settled, you'll save me, Sophronia?"

"Pill, I don't think you've solved the problem."

"People tell me that all the time." He turned about. "Oh, belter, here they come!" A gaggle of pastel puffs mixed with wings and very pretty flowered masks headed purposefully in his direction. Though, to be fair, they might also be after Lord Mersey.

Sophronia followed Pillover's gaze, only to have her attention caught by a hubbub at the door to the ballroom. Within a very brief space of time, it escalated into a loudly voiced argument of the type that ought never be conducted in public, not even between tradesmen. It had everyone's attention. Even Felix and Soap left off their animosity to focus on the astounding breach in social etiquette.

Frowbritcher and a human footman were barring the door against some highly excitable interlopers.

"How thrilling, I do believe someone is trying to infiltrate our party," Sophronia said. "I had no idea an invitation was so desirable. Mumsy will be pleased. We have *arrived* in society at last." She realized that might sound like bragging. "Or there is nothing on at the theater this evening."

Then she caught sight of one intruder. The lady wore no mask and displayed no extravagance of fancy dress. She wasn't trying to attend the ball; she was trying to get inside for some other reason. She turned to face

the crowd.

“Good gracious me, Lady Kingair!” said Felix.

“Sidheag!” said Sophronia at the same time.

Standing to either side of Sidheag, visible only when the ebb of the throng allowed for it, were two huge wolves. One of them had a top hat tied to his head. The other was bigger and shaggier. And hatless.

“Captain Niall?” squeaked Sophronia.

“And a strange werewolf,” added Soap.

Felix looked alarmed. “Werewolves? Unknown, *uninvited* werewolves? Here? How revolting.”

“You do know the by-invitation-only thing is just vampires, don’t you?” said Pillover, under his breath.

Sophronia wasn’t certain if her mother would take the presence of an underdressed Scottish aristocrat and two beast-form werewolves as an honor or a horror. So she stepped forward. She had better make certain it was thought an honor or they’d all be in trouble. “If you’ll pardon me, gentlemen, I believe I have a situation to rectify.”

None of them objected.

Helpful Barnaclegeese

Sophronia pushed her way through the crowd. Her mother was at the top of the stairs, agitating like a malfunctioning mechanical. Her father seemed to be already at the cards. Sophronia was glad to note his absence. One less parent to bamboozle.

"Who are you and why have you brought those *animals* to my party?" Mrs. Temminnick demanded. She must be near hysterics, for she knew better than to address a werewolf with anything but the strictest courtesy. Poor Mumsy did not like chaos, which made it all the odder that she had eight children.

Sophronia stepped up. "Mumsy, I believe I may be of assistance."

"Sophronia, this wouldn't be your fault, would it? Did you invite these… these… hirsute interlopers? Is that academy a complete failure? I thought you were doing so well."

"Now, Mumsy, I brought the son of a duke to Ephraim's party, didn't I?"

"That *is* something."

"Well, this is Lady Kingair, daughter of an earl, a very important person indeed." Technically it was slightly more complicated than that, but daughter of an earl was good enough for Mumsy.

Mrs. Temminnick looked at Sidheag doubtfully. Not for the first time, Sophronia wished her dear friend *sometimes* dressed the part of a peer. Today Lady Kingair was wearing a gown so drab that even a governess wouldn't have bothered.

"But, but, dear, that dress is tweed.… Oh, has she come costumed as a

parlormaid?" Mrs. Temminnick was disposed to be optimistic on behalf of an earl's daughter.

"Now, Mumsy"—Sophronia was quick on the flip—"don't you see? It's a symbolic allegory of the famous myth of Romulus and Remus. Since a werewolf is almost never female, Lady Kingair has dressed as a nanny to foil the wolf shape and properly represent the she-wolf who fed the great hero-founders of Rome."

Mrs. Temminnick balked.

Sophronia looked at her, eyes wide. "Oh, dear, isn't it obvious? I thought it was obvious. I'm sure Sidheag did, too. Didn't you, dear?"

Sidheag balked almost as much as Sophronia's mother.

"Goodness, well, at least they are giving you *some* kind of education at that finishing school." Mrs. Temminnick liked that she hadn't understood a word her daughter had said.

"I could say it in Latin, if that would help?"

"No, dear, no, not Latin as well as tweed. Not in one night."

"Oh, Sophronia!" Sidheag did not want to play along. Fortunately, she also seemed incapable of cogent speech. Solid, unflappable Sidheag was so relieved to see Sophronia, it seemed she might cry. Or cast herself into Sophronia's arms. Impossible options in public, the both of them.

Sophronia had thought Sidheag would be recovered by now, yet she seemed to have gotten worse.

Since she was unable to console her friend with intimacy, Sophronia's training kicked in. "Mumsy, Lady Kingair appears to have misplaced her mask on the journey. Was it terribly distressing, Sidheag dear? Why don't I take her to the family parlor for a restorative cup of tea? I might be able to settle matters, find another mask. This would get us all away from the ball. Ephraim would like that."

Brought back to the purpose of the masquerade, Mrs. Temminnick could think of no better solution.

Dimity appeared at Sidheag's elbow.

No one mentioned the werewolves, although Sophronia and Dimity both nodded at them. Politeness deemed they only be acknowledged, not addressed directly. When in wolf shape, they couldn't exactly engage in polite conversation. It was thought best not to remind them of this fact by attempting an introduction.

Mrs. Temminnick threw her hands up to heaven. “Fine, fine, but the young gentlemen *all* stay here dancing!”

“Of course, Mumsy. They can make up the numbers.” Sophronia sent a silent prayer to Pillover to keep Soap and Felix from murdering each other.

“This way, Sidheag dear.” Sophronia grabbed her friend’s hand. It was icy cold. Sidheag must have ridden through the rain for hours. Sophronia guided Sidheag hurriedly away from the ball.

Captain Niall and his unknown companion followed. It was a mark of how little, if ever, Mrs. Temminnick fraternized with werewolves that she had decided to categorize both as friendly dogs, rather than naked men. Otherwise, she would never have permitted them to accompany her daughter.

The family parlor was a cozy enclave of puffy furniture and unbreakable objects much used by the Temminnick children over the years. They settled Sidheag on the couch nearest the fire. Dimity sat next to her, patting her on the arm, trilling consoling banalities.

Sophronia sent one of the clangermaids off to retrieve tea. She then suggested to Captain Niall and the strange werewolf that they find some of Gresham’s old clothing in the nursery and requested they go change shape there. She worried about the second werewolf, who was a good deal larger than the captain. It meant he would be a good deal larger as a man as well, and Gresham was not particularly large.

With werewolves gone and fire stoked, Sidheag stopped shaking. The tea, once it arrived, had its customary effect—engendering comfort and loosening the tongue. *That’s tea for you*, thought Sophronia, *the great social lubricant*. Soon they had the whole story out of her. No wonder tea was considered a vital weapon of espionage.

“I begged Gramps to go home.” Sidheag’s Scottish accent was thick in her distress, or perhaps from arguing copiously with her great-great-great-grandfather recently.

Dimity hadn’t the strength in the face of such distress, so Sophronia said what they all knew had to be true.

“It’s treason, Sid. You know he can’t. They betrayed him as well as the queen.”

“But the pack should stay whole. He killed… he did what had to be done, let that be an end to it. Why can’t he forgive the others?” Sidheag

adored her pack; she only wanted it to stay together.

"You know he won't," said Sophronia softly.

Frustrated out of her sadness, Sidheag snarled, "Of course I bloody know it! Worse now, he can't. He did as he said he would! He up and challenged for the Woolsey Pack and won. He's garnered himself a new family! A replacement pack."

Sophronia's mind whirled. "Lord Vulkasin is dead?"

Sidheag nodded, her anger abated and the tears returned.

Sophronia was strangely relieved. She'd only seen the werewolf Alpha of the Woolsey Pack a few times, and had never been introduced, but he seemed cruel and unhinged. Knowing the world was without him was oddly cheering. But it didn't solve Sidheag's problem.

"And now he's lost to me. I had to choose."

Sophronia's eyes widened as she grasped Sidheag's meaning. "Are you saying you had to choose between the Kingair Pack and your grandfather?"

Dimity's face was white with distress. "Whyever would you have to do that?"

Sophronia felt faintly ill. Poor Sidheag.

"I canna maintain a relationship with both—Gramps killed his Beta. Killed him! Yet the pack betrayed Gramps. I just…" Sidheag paused, struggling to explain why she was rejecting the only father she had ever known. "It's up to me to fix it, don't you see?" Normally so taciturn, she became loquacious in her despair. "No matter what they tried to do, I love them. Someone has to look after them. Hold them together."

"Oh, dear Sidheag." Dimity fairly crumpled in sympathy.

Bumbersnoot, having been set on the floor by Sophronia, bumped up against Sidheag's ankle, his tail tick-tocking slowly.

"So if it's not Lord Maccon with you, who is the other werewolf?" Sophronia asked.

"Don't you recognize him?" Sidheag seemed to think his identity obvious.

"No. All the werewolves I've ever seen were in human form, except for Captain Niall."

Sidheag looked inquiringly at Dimity, who also shook her head.

"That's the dewan."

"The dewan!" Sophronia and Dimity said it together, shocked. Only the

werewolf in charge of *all* other werewolves. Only the queen's *personal* adviser. Only the werewolf representative on the Shadow Council. Only the man who saw to werewolf assignments in the army itself!

If Mumsy knew who she just called an animal she'd be mortified.

The door opened and in came Captain Niall, decidedly too tall for Gresham's clothes. The trousers were short as a cockle-hunter's and the shirt was basically cuffless. Still, the important parts were covered. The captain, who was a bit of a fancy lad, for a werewolf, was uncomfortable in his shrunken getup, but presentable enough to be among humans. He came to crouch next to Sidheag, his handsome face deeply concerned, his trousers straining alarmingly. He put his back to the fire and placed a hand on the arm of the couch near Sidheag's repulsive tweed skirts. His fingers twitched slightly, as if he would like to stroke her hand in sympathy. Sidheag, for her part, leaned into his presence, taking reassurance there. Neither had the courage to actually touch.

They exchanged a single brief yet deep look of… *sympathy? Something more?*

Sophronia couldn't pinpoint what, but something significant had occurred between them on their recent journey. A connection had shifted, as if they saw each other as equals now.

Then Captain Niall said, as there was no point in hiding the fact that both werewolves had overheard the conversation, "If I may present the gentleman in question?"

Sidheag said, airily, "Oh, of course, no secrets here."

"There are always secrets," corrected Sophronia softly.

The dewan entered the Temminnicks' shabby family parlor. *Oh, how chagrined Mumsy will be*. Then again, perhaps not. As silly as Captain Niall's appearance was, the dewan looked sillier.

He was a large man who had been metamorphosed somewhat late in life. He had dark hair tinged with gray, and a wide face with deep-set eyes. His mouth was a little too full, reminding Sophronia of Felix. He had a cleft in his chin, and his mustache and muttonchops were quite bushy. For a werewolf who was at least a hundred years old, the facial hair was stylishly modern. Unfortunately, Gresham's clothing was stretched to indecency. It was doing little to disguise the necessary, and looked as if it might stop doing that at any moment. All the protruding parts, of which there were a

great deal, were covered in such a quantity of hair as to make the young ladies present wonder if the dewan were not partly wolf *all* the time.

Sidheag did not show the leader of all English werewolves any deference. She didn't even bother to stand, merely saying, "Lord Slaughter, may I present my dearest friends, Miss Temminnick and Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott?"

The dewan, with great dignity for a man so experimentally dressed, answered with, "Young ladies, how do you do?"

Dimity and Sophronia curtsied, careful not to show any neck, as custom demanded. "My lord," they said in unison.

Sidheag said, lip curled, not looking at the great man, "He says there is nothing even he can do to change this outcome and I must stay out of it."

The dewan sighed the sigh of an older gentleman dealing with a hysterical young girl. "Lord Maccon has made his bed and must lie in it. That bed is Woolsey. Frankly, with Vulkasin the way he was, it is not so terrible an outcome. Politically, Lord Maccon will be good to have closer to town. I'll give him plenty to do, keep him out of trouble."

Sidheag wailed, "But he has left Scotland forever! I must be allowed to attend my pack!"

"Admirable sentiments, as I have said before, young lady. But they aren't your pack, you are not a werewolf, and this is not your concern. Allow Captain Niall and me to manage Kingair, and me to deal with their punishment for attempted treason. Exile, I think, for a decade or two. Now that we have delivered you back to the safe bosom of your friends, we must be on our way. Captain, shall we?"

Captain Niall stood, unhappy, and cleared his throat. He said to the assembled young ladies, "I do not blame Lord Maccon for his choices. For an Alpha werewolf to be betrayed by his Beta—there is no worse pain. It cuts through the heart and mind, but also what is left of the soul. It tears at the bonds of pack, the instinct that holds us as one unshakable group. Lord Maccon could never unify Kingair again after this, nor would he want to. But he is still strong enough to hold a pack. Woolsey will do well for him. Please, take care of your friend, and keep this in mind? Try to get her to understand?"

Sidheag looked betrayed and unreasonably angered by his statement. She jumped to her feet, hands fisted at her sides. "I dinna give two tail

shakes about Gramps! He has abandoned the others. What are they to do? What are *we* to do? How will my pack survive without an Alpha? Who will look after my uncles? Who will plead for a lesser punishment?"

Captain Niall shook his head sadly. "Please, give us time, Lady Kingair. This is not your concern."

Sidheag said, softly, looking to Sophronia for understanding, "I asked Gramps to bite me."

Sophronia gasped.

Dimity let out a squeak of alarm.

Bumbersnoot trundled in a shocked circle, as if he actually understood what was happening.

"Oh, Sidheag. You didn't." Sophronia tried to be gentle. Sidheag was suffering so much, but such a request was plain *stupid*.

Sidheag growled, sounding rather werewolf-like. "He refused that, too! Too young, he said. Last of the Maccon line, he said. Not ready, he said."

"Female!" cried Dimity in frustration.

Sidheag shook her head as if tossing aside the very fact of how unbelievably risky such a request was. Maybe one in a thousand men survived the bite and managed metamorphosis into a supernatural. And for women… well, Sophronia knew of only three female werewolves in all history.

Sidheag looked to Captain Niall. "So, what *are* we going to do?"

The werewolf said, not unkindly, "*We* are going to do nothing. You three are going to return to school, like good girls. I've written a note explaining Lady Kingair's extended absence."

The dewan had grown increasingly impatient. "Niall, we really do not have the time to humor children further, not even Lady Kingair. As it is, we will lose a night's travel tomorrow. It's full moon, after all. We shouldn't have come here. We should have tried for Kingair before the moon."

"We'd never have made it," said the captain. Then, like a good loner, he acquiesced meekly to the dewan's insistence, saying politely to the ladies, "I will take my leave of you now. Best wishes for safe travels back."

Sidheag looked for a long moment at the werewolf captain. It was almost one of those longing looks Lady Linette made them practice. Only this one, Sophronia thought, had a modicum of sincerity to it that she herself had yet to master. She felt guilty watching Sidheag expose her

emotions in such a way—intrusive.

So Sophronia turned to make her farewell to the dewan. “You will not stay to meet my mother? She’ll be sorry to have missed you, as Lord Slaughter, of course. I do not believe my parents play in the same political arena as the dewan.”

He looked at her, concentrated on her as a person for the first time, and not an inconvenient schoolgirl. “And you will not tell them of your lessons at finishing school? Or of this conversation?”

“Absolutely not.”

The great man nodded. “Lady Linette does good work.”

Dimity said nervously, “It was kind of you to escort Sidheag here.”

“I should not have done so but for Captain Niall’s insistence. And he is necessary. Speaking of which, Captain? Now, please.” It was not a request.

With the barest of courtesy, the two werewolves strode from the room.

When Sophronia and Dimity turned back, Sidheag was trying to pull herself together, eyes glassy.

“I can’t believe you rode through the night from London on wolf-back!” said Sophronia, gently applying admiration.

“I can’t believe you requested the bite,” said Dimity, more accusatory.

“I can’t believe my own Gramps turned me down,” huffed Sidheag, a little color returning to her cheeks.

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” said Sophronia.

“You called, Ria my love?” said Lord Mersey, letting himself into the room.

“Oh, *mercies*, Lord Mersey. Yes, I see. Ha ha,” Sophronia was quick to respond.

“Don’t call her that,” said Soap, still entirely masked, following the other young man inside.

“I tried to stop them, but goodness, it’s nice to get away from all those ruffles,” said Pillover, trailing in last of all. He bent to pat Bumbersnoot, who clattered in greeting.

Sophronia said, “This is wonderful.” She walked to the door, stuck her head out, and said, “Would any other eligible young men like to join our party? I don’t know, to attract *more* of my mother’s unwanted attention?”

Dimity said, on a slight smile, although still tending to Sidheag’s finer feeling, “Be sensible, Sophronia, we don’t *know* any other eligible young

men.”

The boys must have missed the two werewolves, for they made no mention of having seen the dewan. Lord Mersey, at least, would have recognized him and made some derogatory remark.

Pillover and Soap settled easily into the group. Pillover being Dimity’s brother, and Soap Sophronia’s friend, they assumed levels of intimacy that would have given Mrs. Temminnick hysterics. For one thing, they sat far too close to the young ladies.

Felix stayed to the outside, held back by society’s protocols. He pretended keen interest in Bumbersnoot.

“What’s the dilemma, ladies?” he asked, perceptive enough.

This was too much of a crisis to stand on social airs. “Come sit, Felix,” Sophronia said, intentionally dropping his title. “This is an emergency, no time for folderol. Soap, take off that ridiculous mask.”

Felix started when Soap removed the mask. “You! The chimney sweep.”

Soap swept him a seated bow. “The same.”

Felix spluttered.

Sophronia interrupted before things could get out of hand. “Both of you, behave. Now, Sidheag, what do you need from us? More tea?”

Dimity began pouring for everyone. When it became clear the pot was likely to run dry, she went to the door, corralled a clangermaid, revived the pot, and returned, having wedged the door shut with an armchair as added precaution.

“We have about a quarter of an hour before Mumsy realizes the boys are missing,” said Sophronia, consulting a pocket watch.

Felix was glaring at Soap. Now that he knew who Soap really was, Felix was upset at being challenged during a dance by a sootie.

Soap was focused on Sidheag. He considered her a friend—they had sparred on occasion. He liked her masculine ways and acerbic attitude. He respected her as a decent gambler. No icing on Miss Maccon, he was prone to saying. “Miss Maccon, I’ve never seen you upset afore. What’s happened?”

Pillover sat cross-legged on the floor, Bumbersnoot in his lap, attitude mostly sympathetic. Although he did seem morosely pleased to be in the company of someone as unhappy as he.

Dimity relayed Sidheag’s tale of woe, avoiding mention of the dewan. It

was intelligencer instinct that caused her to withhold that bit of information, but Sophronia agreed with her decision. Felix didn't need to know everything; his father was a Pickleman, after all. The Picklemen were probably elated by the werewolf crisis.

During the telling, Lord Mersey, unaccustomed to all attention being on someone other than him, came timidly over and drew up a small hassock to sit on, joining the circle by the fire. He wisely held his tongue, but Sophronia could practically read his mind: *Who cares what happens to a pack of werewolves? Good riddance to bad rubbish*. But he knew himself to be in the minority. He was also, Sophronia hoped, a genuinely decent enough person to sympathize with Sidheag over the loss of a loved one—whether or not he approved of that loved one's condition. Maybe seeing her distress would make him think that not all supernaturals were bad. Then again, Kingair had just tried to kill the queen. What a pickle this was.

Sophronia wasn't sure what to think. She wished, inexplicably, that she could get Lord Akeldama's perspective. Vampires and werewolves were mainly uninterested in one another's private affairs, except where they crossed into alliance with the Queen of England. They were protective of their unusual acceptance in British Government and guarded it jealously as the only supernaturals in the known world with legal status. Which explained the dewan's involvement. He had to fix this. The stability of the nation depended on it. *There you go*, thought Sophronia, *perhaps I don't need to talk to Lord Akeldama to understand after all.*

They sat drinking tea and suggesting possible plans of action, consoling Sidheag with words and imagined deeds.

Sidheag remained mainly monosyllabic but after her third cup took a deep, shaky breath. "Thank you all for being so kind. But I know what I have to do. It's only… Sophronia, I'll need your help."

"Of course." Sophronia looked up, eager to be of assistance. She hated the feeling of helplessness her friend's misery engendered.

"I have to go home to Kingair. Now. Right away." Sidheag's expression pleaded with her not to argue.

Sophronia nodded. Her mind was already on it.

"You want to follow Captain Niall?" Dimity had seen that intimate look exchanged between their tall, angular friend and the handsome werewolf.

"My pack needs me. Kingair needs me."

The train is probably fastest, Sophronia was thinking. “You can help them?” was what she said. *The right train and we might even beat them there, as the werewolves have to lock down tomorrow night*. She did some quick calculations in her head.

“I am the Lady of Kingair, after all. There is power in the title.” Sidheag sounded confident.

“What good could you possibly do?” Felix asked. The others would have simply supported Sidheag, however illogical or emotional her choice. She was their friend and they would do what was needed.

Sidheag spoke, peer to peer. “You don’t understand. Pack is more than a group; it is a container. Like a jug of water that can hold a great deal if it is intact. Without an Alpha, the jug fractures and the water drains away.”

“You think *you* can patch the leak?” Felix’s lip curled slightly in genuine disbelief.

Sidheag snorted. “Bad analogy. But, yes, in a way I do. I think I am more than a little Alpha by nature. My uncles, they trust me.”

“To become a kind of Alpha yourself? Or help one of your uncles take the position?” Sophronia was confused as to what Sidheag thought she could do.

“Either, both, I don’t know, something. Just offering emotional support I’m sure would help.”

Sophronia thought this was foolhardy. But she had no better plan. She didn’t know werewolf dynamics well enough to predict their reaction to Sidheag’s interloping. But if this was what would make Sidheag feel better, to commit a mad dash across England to Scotland, then Sophronia would arrange a mad dash or die trying.

Sophronia had made her decision before she’d even finished that thought. “We’ll need to get to a train station. Mumsy will have all the horses tied down, but I have an idea that I think will work.”

Sidheag looked relieved. She herself was a decent leader, but under current conditions she trusted Sophronia to get the details sorted. “Good, I like trains.”

Sophronia continued to scheme. “I think it’d work best if we went as young men, fewer questions.”

“We?”

“I’m coming with you, of course.”

Dimity said, instantly, “Then I’m coming, too!”

Felix Mersey added, “I as well. Sounds like a lark. Besides, can’t have you ladies running around the countryside without some kind of supervision. Especially not if werewolves are involved.”

“If he’s going, I’m going.” Soap’s tone of voice brooked no argument.

Sophronia did weight sums in her head.

Everyone else turned to look at Pillover, the only one still silent.

“No, thank you,” said Pillover primly. “I loathe adventures. I’m sure Bumbersnoot will join you, though.”

Bumbersnoot blew smoke out his ears in agreement.

Sophronia said, “That’s good, because I don’t think it can take six.”

“You don’t think *what* can take six?” Sidheag seemed to be perking up now that the others had agreed so readily to her need to head north.

“The airdinghy, of course.”

Dimity knew exactly what Sophronia was talking about. “The one we stole and stashed? It still works?”

“Don’t see why not. Mumsy hasn’t lit her floating lanterns yet; we could steal the helium meant for those.”

She was interrupted by a rattling at the door.

“Sophronia! Let me in this instant,” said an autocratic female voice.

“Oh, dear,” said Sophronia. There was nowhere for the boys to hide; they were about to get in serious trouble.

The knob rattled again. Then the door crashed open with a splintering sound, overturning the chair Dimity had wedged against.

In strode Mrs. Barnaclegoose.

Mrs. Barnaclegoose was a dear friend of Mrs. Temminnick’s. A country lady much feared by gentlemen of all ages because she was decided in her ways, firm in her opinions, and interested in impressing both upon everyone around her. She was an inveterate gossip who favored stylish gowns designed with far less substantial figures in mind. Tonight’s ensemble was a blue-and-white-plaid dress with a wide collar from which dangled an impressive quantity of fringe. The fringe shook much in the way a finger of reprimand might.

Everyone was terrified by the intrusion. Mrs. Barnaclegoose had an aura

of imminent discipline. She was the type of female who would report to Sophronia's mother on the situation in the family parlor in such vibrant terms as to make it seem a veritable orgy.

"Oh, there you are," she said calmly to Sophronia, completely ignoring the others.

"Good evening, Mrs. Barnaclegoose. I did not see you arrive at the ball, or I would have tendered my regards immediately."

"Very prettily said, dear. As you can tell, I'm not dressed for a masquerade. I hadn't intended to come. I'm only here to deliver something. Oh, there's the nice little doggie! Good evening, Bumbersnoot, how do you do?"

Bumbersnoot submitted good-naturedly to having his leather ears scratched. Mrs. Barnaclegoose loomed over him, breasts heaving, stays creaking alarmingly.

"Such a good little man," said Mrs. Barnaclegoose to Bumbersnoot. She straightened and handed Sophronia a long, thin package. "Just this once, mind you. A similar request from anyone of less standing and I should have considered it an insult. Imagine asking *me* to deliver a gift as if I were a messenger boy."

She turned to leave the room, trailing a strong scent of lavender in her wake. At the door she paused to say, "Now, dear, you will be careful with that one? He's too old for his own good."

It must be from Lord Akeldama. Sophronia seized the opportunity. "You would recommend against his offer of patronage?"

"Gone as far as that, has it?"

"Not formally. I'm still in school, after all, but I think he might ask."

Mrs. Barnaclegoose hinted darkly, "I expect other contenders."

"Oh?" Sophronia looked at her hard. Mrs. Barnaclegoose had guided her into espionage. And despite her once having covered Mrs. Barnaclegoose with trifle, Sophronia liked her. "Would you care to elaborate?"

Mrs. Barnaclegoose glanced about at the assembled party as if only just noticing them all. "Interesting collection, Miss Temminnick. Is that Golborne's get? I was engaged to him once, you know? Before we found out about his political leanings. The duke, I mean, not the get. Now, dears, I'd scatter if I were you. Mrs. Temminnick is soon to send one of her other spawn to check up on Lady Kingair's condition, and they aren't as"—she

paused, knowingly—“discreet as I.”

Sophronia could imagine the delight in Petunia’s eyes. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Barnaclegoose.” She curtsied deeply.

Mrs. Barnaclegoose left, closing the door behind her.

The room erupted into confused questions. Dimity’s higher tones resolved into the only one Sophronia felt like addressing.

“Who was she?”

“Oh, Mrs. Barnaclegoose? She’s the one who recruited me.”

“I forgot you were a covert. I never would have guessed *that* woman a product of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s.”

“I believe that’s the idea,” said Sidheag, sounding almost like her old self.

“Who is her patron, do you think?” Dimity seemed particularly curious; perhaps she saw Mrs. Barnaclegoose as a model for her own future lifestyle.

Sophronia answered because she wanted Felix to know she had options. She wanted Felix to know *he* had options. “Queen Victoria, I suspect. She acted as if this delivery was a favor to a friend, and the same when she recruited me to the school. I’ve never asked her outright, but I think her patron must be someone very important. The queen matches her personality.

“Speaking of which, I find it’s generally best to follow her advice. Ladies, we should go down directly. Gentlemen, in about fifteen minutes Lady Kingair will have a fainting fit that will result in our needing to retire from the ball early.” Sidheag nodded her willingness to participate. “Dimity, are you ready with the assist?”

“Of course.”

Sophronia looked to Soap. “If the gentlemen would meet us in the gazebo in a quarter of an hour? Pillover will show you where. Soap, can I trust you to requisition sufficient supplies from the kitchen?”

Soap nodded.

“Lord Mersey, you’re on clothing. The nursery is four doors down on the left. There are masses of Gresham’s old things stashed there. Mumsy is keeping them for when the twins are big enough. Bring enough for all of us, lots of sizes and such. I trust you have a good eye for the figures of ladies?”

Felix’s kohl-rimmed eyes were mellow behind the slim jester mask.

“I’ve seen you in trousers before, both of you. Although not Miss Dimity, of course.”

Dimity blushed. “Must I?”

Sophronia said firmly, “I think it best. Then we’re only a bunch of lads—ladding it about. Young ladies on the loose get noticed.”

Dimity winced in anticipated humiliation.

Sophronia gave her team a quick look-over. They all seemed prepared for action. Sidheag had bucked up, less worried about life now that Sophronia had a scheme in play. Pillover looked like Pillover, the weight of the world oppressing him. Nothing to be done about that. She worried about Soap. Would he be sacked for being away from engineering for so long? Would he refrain from popping Felix in the snoot?

Sophronia reached down and scooped up her mechanimal. She fed Bumbersnoot the gift from Lord Akeldama. It was almost too long to fit into Bumbersnoot’s storage compartment, but he managed it. She marched from the room, clutching Bumbersnoot under one arm. Dimity and Sidheag trailed after.

They reentered the ballroom.

Just in time, as it turned out. The grandfather clock in the hallway behind them was striking midnight. Speeches were soon to commence, then more nibbles, then more dancing. Ephraim was leading his cupcake lady up to the dais in front of the quartet, for some concentrated adoration and praise. The mechanicals circled in a pattern, herding people to stand on the dance floor, passing out glasses of bubbly. Sophronia, Sidheag, and Dimity hustled to the front, in prominent position to be seen by Sophronia’s mother and cause a maximum amount of distraction with sudden illnesses. They each took a glass of champagne, knowing that flying crystal and spilled drinks could be almost as bad as the faint itself.

The clock finished its final gong. The musicians stopped playing and everyone stilled, turning expectantly to face the dais crowded with proud parents and the happy couple.

All was in readiness.

Sophronia prepared to give Sidheag the signal.

Then every mechanical in the house went completely and utterly unhinged.

A Crisis of Operatic Proportions

There was no other way to put it—they went bonkers. One moment, mechanicals were passing out the champagne. The next, they were engaged in a high-speed romp along their tracks. Those that had the bearings to do so twirled in place. Those that were less dexterous twirled only their heads, like owls. It was a synchronized ballet of sophisticated engineering. A feast of mad pirouetting, as much as conical metal contraptions attached to tracks could be said to pirouette. Such a ramp-up in action, so different from their ordinary sedate trundling, caused internal engines to crank. The lower part of the ballroom became steamy. Sophronia closed her mouth on a hysterical giggle. No one had any feet. The masqueraders looked to be bobbing gently in a white sea.

The mechanicals stopped as suddenly as they had started, going perfectly still as if hit by a blast from Vieve's obstructor. Everyone relaxed, thinking it some strange glitch, now ended. But before the guests could completely recover, the mechanicals began to sing, all together, in perfect unison. Sophronia hadn't even known one could instill such complex group protocols into mechanicals.

The mechanicals sang as loudly as their voice boxes allowed. The tune was startlingly patriotic. Although, afterward, no one would claim that "Rule, Britannia!" sung in such high, tinny tones was particularly stirring. The fancy new models, on loan, threw themselves into their dramatic roles. Even Frowbritcher, at the top of the stairs, the most sophisticated mechanical in the Temminnick household, was participating. Such nonsense

ought, by rights, to be far beneath his dignity!

Bumbersnoot, dangling from his lacy cord over Sophronia's shoulder, looked as if he'd like to join. But he had no voice box and no track. So he beat out time to the tune with his tail, slapping the side of Sophronia's hip rhythmically. The mechanicals sang the full length of the song, drawing out the chorus at the end on a long "slaves!" Longer than any human could hold the note.

Then they stopped.

Instead of going back about their duties, they stayed stopped. All their little steam engines cycled down, as if they were dying in their tracks. Silence descended. Only the tick-tock of Bumbersnoot's tail continued. He seemed the only one immune to a massive turn-off.

There was a moment's stunned silence, and then pandemonium reigned. Only this time, it was humans. No one there had ever seen anything like it. Mrs. Temminnick's amazing hostess abilities were praised by all. Imagine the exorbitant expense in mechanics' commissions alone! But Mrs. Temminnick was no Sophronia; she could not hide her surprise and claim credit where none was due. Thus the shock and awe, initially translated into delight, quickly changed to fear that such a spectacle was *uncontrolled*.

This, soon, was the least of their problems, as it became patently clear that every mechanical in the house was dead without possibility of revival.

There was no one to serve the food. No one to respond to the bell rope. No one to open the doors. No one to clip the wicks and replace the candles. No one to turn down the gas. No one to carry the wood and lay the fires against nighttime chill. Worst of all, there was no one to refill the champagne glasses. The party was ruined. The evening was considered a loss. The whole week was looking pretty bad. How on earth would they function? What were they to do? No one could imagine life without servants. Of course, there were a few human staff; everyone kept *some*. But they were intended for complicated tasks. It was beneath one's human staff to do the work of a mechanical, not to mention the fact that there was simply too much of that work!

The gentry at the ball spiraled into panic. What if it was not just the Temminnicks' mechanicals malfunctioning? What if their own servants were broken? Who would make the tea in the morning? Several of the ladies began to have hysterics. Even a few gentlemen succumbed to

overwrought nerves.

Sophronia, Dimity, and Sidheag participated briefly in the confusion. After all, they also had never seen anything like it. But it only took them a moment to realize they should take advantage of the situation. Such a crisis as this, mass mechanical revolt of an incomprehensibly passive variety, would occupy the adults long enough for them to make good their escape.

Thus, without any fainting necessary, they left the ball and made for the gazebo.

The boys were already there. Soap had found a number of large wicker picnic baskets and stuffed them with food filched from the kitchen. Felix provided a pillow sack containing a collection of menswear. Pillover was standing off to the side with these items, watching as the other two attempted to extract the airdinghy from its intimate relationship with the gazebo.

While Dimity went to point out how it had been incorporated, Sophronia dashed off with Sidheag to find Roger. He might know where Mumsy was keeping the helium.

Roger proved amenable to repurposing the transportation nodules, so long as Sophronia took the blame. He hooked up a donkey to the helium cart so quickly, it was almost as if he had been expecting never to use it for the party display.

Sophronia gave him a sardonic look.

“This much helium, miss, for a lantern show? Bloody great waste.”

“My thoughts exactly, Roger.”

They returned with donkey and helium just as the airdinghy basket tumbled off the roof of the gazebo with a crash. Fortunately, it survived intact. Felix and Soap righted it and jumped inside to throw out the four balloons. While they wrestled the sail and mast up the middle, the girls and Roger unrolled the balloons and began to fill them with helium. There was no way to rush this part, although Sophronia kept glancing back to the house, where the shifting lights were her only clue that all was still chaos in the ballroom.

None too soon, the four balloons were filled. They tugged up the basket so that it rose sedately into the air, shedding decorative bits of gazebo in its wake. Felix and Soap managed to raise the center sail. It was a pity they disliked each other so intensely, for it was clear that they made an efficient

team. Sophronia appreciated efficiency.

Dimity and Sidheag climbed inside, awkward in long skirts and with no ladder. Sophronia swung Bumbersnoot over. Pillover passed up the hampers. Roger tossed in the sack of clothes.

“Everyone good to go?” Sophronia asked, wondering what they were forgetting.

Four faces peeked over the edge, nodding. Soap and Felix extended their arms down while Dimity and Sidheag went to the other side of the gondola against the lean.

The balloons caught a breeze and they bobbed up a bit.

Sophronia held up her hands to be lifted inside.

“What in heaven’s name is going on *here*?” came Petunia’s shocked voice. She appeared as if by magic around the side of Mumsy’s rhododendrons.

“Cut us free, Pillover!” yelled Sophronia, dangling off the side. Felix had both his hands wrapped around one of her wrists and Soap the other.

“Sophronia Angelina Temminnick, what on *earth* are you doing to the gazebo now?”

Pillover unlashed the airdinghy from where it had been tied to the gazebo columns.

It lifted sedately upward.

“Wait,” cried Petunia, “come back here this instant! You can’t just drift off with a duke’s son. That’s not sporting!”

Felix and Soap hauled Sophronia into the gondola. She blessed the split skirt of her costume; it allowed her to leg over and land on her feet inside. She turned to look back at her sister.

“Sorry, Petunia, but this is an emergency. I’m only borrowing him for a bit.”

Petunia stood, head tilted back, watching them float away. Pillover slouched over to stand next to her. They were outside earshot, so Sophronia had no idea what he said, but to everyone’s surprise, Petunia seemed mollified. She took his arm, and he led her with great dignity back toward the house.

“He’s coming out well, for a pustule,” said Dimity, with evident pride.

“He may have found his calling at last,” said Sophronia. “Hoodwinking my sisters. That’s no mean feat. We have brothers, too; we’re usually

immune to their charms."

Dimity chuckled. "Imagine Pill, with charms! What a hoot."

Sidheag said, in all seriousness, "He should be at Mademoiselle Geraldine's, he'd make a great intelligencer. No one should ever believe it of him." She turned to face inside and assess how they were handling the airdinghy.

Soap was concentrating on manning the sail, as if he actually knew what he was about.

"*Do* you know what you are doing, Soap?" Sophronia asked.

"Not really, miss, but someone's got to."

"So, which way is north?" asked Sidheag.

Sophronia leaned over the side of the basket, squinting into the night, looking for the lights of Wootton Bassett. The basket tilted and Dimity hurried to counterbalance.

Sophronia pointed. "That way, more east than north for now. Everyone look out for a big clock face. That'll be the nearest railway station."

With no propeller, they had to drift up and down, searching for a breeze headed in the correct direction. Finally, they hooked into one that carried them along at a sedate pace. This was not exactly a high-speed, high-risk endeavor. Fortunately for them, Pillover seemed to have adequately distracted Petunia, and the mechanical malfunction seemed to have adequately distracted everyone else. Sophronia kept looking back, but no carriage or horseman came galloping after them.

Dimity gave a little cry. "There it is!"

Indeed, there it was—a small clock tower, peeking up above the other buildings of the town. Soap grabbed at the tiller and the airdinghy obligingly slid to one side. Thus they approached the station silently, a small bobbing craft within the damp night.

While Soap and Felix bickered mildly over how best to steer, Sidheag turned to Sophronia. "We can catch a train north there?"

Sophronia hated to disappoint. "Wootton Bassett's not very big and, as a general rule, people are going through it to somewhere else. Not many trains stop, and when they do it's either east to London or Oxford, or west to Bristol."

"Well, I certainly don't want to go back to London."

"Nor do you want to go to Bristol. Who would?" said Dimity, a

decidedly snobbish tone to her voice.

“We need one heading to Oxford?” suggested Sidheag.

Sophronia nodded. “From there we can switch to a northbound line. I’m worried there won’t be one until morning, but it’s worth a try. Wootton rarely gets nighttime passenger trains.”

The other two knew what that meant. If a passenger could get somewhere quickly, and with all the modern conveniences of first class, there was no need for overnight service. Vampires couldn’t leave their territory, and werewolves could move faster on four paws than a train on rails.

Nevertheless, Sophronia had hopes. “There *are* sometimes freight trains puffing through at night—out of the ports. We might be able to jump one of those, although freight will be going to London. We’d have to scramble to hop a passenger halfway to get to Oxford.”

Sidheag looked doubtful. A freight train wouldn’t stop at Wootton Bassett unless they flagged it down. “Do you have a plan?”

“Of course,” said Sophronia, but then added in confusion, “Except it doesn’t look like I need it. See there?”

They were coming in over the station, and lo and behold, there was a train, sitting patiently, as if waiting for them.

“My, that one is a peculiar-looking beast,” Sophronia said, tilting her head in confusion.

“Looks pretty enough to me,” responded Sidheag, who clearly had great, if blind, affection for the railway.

Sophronia summoned Felix. “Lord Mersey, stop bothering Soap and come look at this.”

“I’m not bothering anyone!” Felix left off trying to fly the airship and came to stand next to Sophronia at the side of the basket. Dimity and Sidheag stayed to the opposite side. It was a dance they’d been conducting since they floated off, in order to properly weight the four balloons.

“Have you ever seen a train like that before?” Sophronia assumed that Felix was well traveled.

The young lord shook his head, equally mystified. “Goodness, no. It looks as if someone crammed a first-class passenger train and a freight train together. Most abnormal.”

Sophronia tilted her head. “That’s exactly what I thought.”

“What’s going on?” demanded Dimity.

“It looks like someone took four carriages from a passenger train and then added two from a freight in between them.”

“Could it be a circus or some other kind of acting troupe?” suggested Dimity.

Felix said, “I think it’s more likely a special delivery—military, perhaps. With the freight carriages in the middle like that? It’s as if the passengers are needed to protect them.” He craned his head over the edge and to one side, as if trying to see the side of the train.

“Careful,” said Sophronia.

“Aww, Ria, you care.”

“Don’t be silly. I prefer not to clean up the mess if you fall out.”

“I’d miss you, too, my lovely.”

“Would you stop leaning!” Sophronia actually was worried. Felix wasn’t trained to fall overboard the way she was.

“Looks like there is writing on the side of one of the freight cars. Can’t read it, though. Might be a hint.” He finally pulled himself to safety.

“Well,” said Sophronia philosophically, “since it looks to be headed in the correct direction, shall we try for it?”

“Why not?” said Sidheag.

They floated on with greater purpose, if no greater speed.

Unfortunately, the little breeze they were riding wasn’t fast enough. The engine of the train puffed to life, without the customary toot of warning. This peculiar beastie was apparently interested in being stealthy. Or as stealthy as possible, for a train.

“We aren’t going to make it in time.” Sidheag looked resigned, but no closer to tears than normal. That was a relief. She seemed to be getting her gumption back.

Felix rounded on Soap. “Can’t you make her go faster?”

Soap did not dignify this with a reply. Airdinghies were designed for secrecy, not speed.

Sophronia took out her hurlie and lashed one of the airdinghy mooring ropes behind the grapple.

Dimity followed this action with wide, troubled eyes. “I do not think what you are about to do is a very good idea.”

Sophronia looked at Felix and Sidheag. “Can you rig something up with

one of the other mooring ropes?”

Felix looked doubtful but went poking about the gondola for something sharp and curved.

Dimity produced an umbrella, but it was not strong enough.

“What we need is an anchor,” said Sophronia.

They closed in on the train; it was now spitting distance away.

It steamed up and began to leave the station with a quiet chug-chug.

Sophronia took aim and shot her grappling hook.

Felix leaned over the side and took a swing with an improvised lasso. He missed whatever protrusion he was aiming for.

Sidheag tutted at him and took the lasso away to give it a try. Being a gentleman, he let her, although he was clearly not pleased with ceding a sporting endeavor to a female. Sidheag, however, managed to loop the lasso over a finial-looking thing on the last passenger carriage on her first try.

Sophronia’s hurlie scraped along the top of the same passenger carriage and then hooked into the front top lip of the last coach. Now they had purchase on two points of the same carriage.

The train picked up speed out of the station and both ropes jerked. Sophronia, for added security, unstrapped her hurlie and fastened it to the railing of the gondola. She trusted Vieve to have built the hurlie to hold her weight, not necessarily to haul an airdinghy full of people.

The airdinghy leaned dangerously as it was suddenly being dragged along by a moving train. Luckily, the locomotive wasn’t moving fast. Nevertheless, an airship had not yet been built to be dragged along by something big on the ground.

“Soap,” yelled Sophronia into the wind, “we need to take her down, land her on top of the train.”

“Oh, miss, that’s not your best idea.”

“We can do it.”

“You, my dear, are overly optimistic!” said Felix, agreeing with Soap for once.

The gondola leaned all the way to one side. Dimity shrieked and almost tumbled over the edge. Sidheag grabbed on to her and the railing at the same time. Soap braced himself against the tiller, and then realized there was no point—the sail was now useless.

The train slowed. The airdinghy partly righted itself.

Soap pulled in the sail.

Sophronia said, “Everyone take a corner of the basket and let out the helium, slowly now, not too fast.”

“Oh god oh god oh god,” murmured Dimity, who up until that moment Sophronia would never have categorized as particularly religious. “This is bad.”

Sidheag agreed. “Cut us loose, Sophronia, you’re hurting the poor train. There’ll be another one along soon.”

But Sophronia *knew* they could do it. Plus, she was wildly curious about that strange-looking train. “Brace for it, and hold tight!”

Sidheag took one corner, Dimity another, Felix the third, Sophronia the fourth, with Soap holding the center and manning the controls.

Each of the four balloons had various dangling cords, but one cord in particular, lined with small red flags, was connected to the helium release flap at the base.

Sophronia nodded and they all tugged on their red flags at once.

The airdinghy jolted and sank like a stone.

“Whoa, stop, too much!” yelled Soap.

The train below them picked up speed and the gondola tilted in response.

Only Soap managed to hang on, possibly because he was the strongest among them. Everyone else cried and fell. Sidheag landed with her feet near Dimity’s head. Sophronia landed on Felix. The picnic hampers landed one on Sidheag’s foot and the other on Soap. Soap caught it by the handle and lashed it down to the base of the tiller with a few quick loops of spare rope. Sidheag grunted in pain but seemed no more than bruised.

“Well, Ria, this is nice,” said Felix.

Sophronia was plastered against him. She struggled to roll away. He put one skinny arm about her, keeping her close.

It was a bit too good feeling. Sophronia had a brief hysterical thought that perhaps Felix was like figgy pudding. Rich and delicious but best sampled in moderation. A seasonal treat. He smelled amazing.

Sophronia righted herself and shrugged Felix off. “Ready, everyone, let’s try again. Little more gradual this time.”

Soap was tall enough to lean over and pull down on one release cord and then another. Sophronia rolled to one side and Dimity to the other, pulling

on those flags. The basket sank some more. Felix and Sidheag began to ratchet in the mooring ropes. No easy task against the pull of the train, but they did their best.

It was working. By careful degrees they sank down, taking care to go toward the train before sinking further; otherwise they might be dragged directly behind and fall to the tracks. The mooring ropes had winches attached to the top. Sidheag and Felix strained against the levers.

Then, with a clunk, the gondola landed on the top of the rear passenger carriage. The basket was still on its side, which made for an awkward crash. The last of the helium escaped the balloons, and the balloons collapsed half on top of the train, half onto the basket and everyone's heads. Quickly as they could, the five stowaways untangled themselves and climbed out. Sophronia knew they had made too much of a racket on the roof, but no one seemed interested in checking the source.

Everyone was bruised and shaken, but otherwise unharmed. Dimity was white faced but still functioning. After all, there had been no blood. Sidheag was looking, if anything, buoyed by the experience. Soap was stoic and calm. Felix was grinning.

"Jolly good," he said, sounding a bit too much like a toff out on the town.

Sophronia gave him a quelling look and tried not to think about being pressed against him.

After a brief discussion, they decided to leave the airdinghy where it was. Its usefulness was weighed as superior to the fact that its discovery would alert others to their presence.

"Here's hoping we don't go through any tunnels" was Sophronia's opinion.

They extracted their supplies. Mercifully, the picnic hampers had stayed latched during the landing, although Sophronia couldn't vouch for the condition of the contents. The hard-boiled eggs had probably coddled in shock. They had to collect the clothing, scattered about, and stuff it back into the sack.

Sophronia's heart was in her mouth. "Oh, no, where's Bumbersnoot!"

She began frantically rustling through the collapsed balloons, her world in crisis. Had he fallen out? Was he lying damaged and alone in the middle of the moor?

Soap produced him from within the second picnic basket. “Stashed him there for safety when we first took to the skies.”

Sophronia clutched her mechanimal gratefully. “Oh, thank goodness!” She resisted a near-overwhelming urge to embrace Soap.

Bumbersnoot wagged his tail at her and tooted a bit of smoke out his ears in excitement.

The train rattled along at a snail’s pace, for which Sophronia was grateful. They lashed down the gondola and rolled up the balloons as much as they could. Then they cautiously made their way to the side and peered over the edge. Like most first-class carriages, this one had three doors along its side for boarding at a station, one to each separate compartment. There was no ladder or way to climb down, and simply a footboard at the coach door.

Soap, who’d only ever seen a train from above, was intrigued. “It’s like they stuck three horse coaches together.”

Sophronia smiled at him. “I believe that was the basis of the design, yes.”

“We’ll have to all share one coach, then, won’t we, miss?”

“I know, terribly uncouth, girls and boys traveling together without a chaperone.” Sophronia gently mocked his prudishness, especially since they’d recently been tumbling all over one another in a balloon.

“I suppose we need to be able to communicate,” relented Soap, who nevertheless looked wistfully down at the footboard of the middle door, as if he actually wanted to be separated from the girls and alone with Felix for the rest of the evening.

Felix, who by rights ought to have been more gallant than Soap about everyone’s sensibilities, only gave the sootie a scornful look.

Sophronia selected the very last of the three doors.

She looped Bumbersnoot’s reticule strap over her neck and went first, without discussion. Carefully, holding fast to the roof railings, she eased over the edge and lowered herself down. She was tall enough so that when her arms were fully extended, she only had a short drop. It was tricky, as the footboard wasn’t very wide. She wobbled dangerously on the landing and nearly tumbled off the train entirely. Sidheag and Soap, who were tall, would have an easier time of it, but she’d have to watch Felix and Dimity carefully. She peeked in the small window of the coach door. Inside, it was

dark and apparently vacant. She motioned for the others to wait while she fished her picks out of a pocket and jimmied the lock. The tumblers went over without protest. She scooted along the footboard, out of the way, and the door opened easily.

It was eerie inside. Moonlight filtered in from the windows opposite the door, slanting across the two facing blue velvet benches and dust motes in the air. The compartment was definitely empty, and she would lay good money on the other two being vacant as well. This entire first-class carriage seemed deserted. The coach held no luggage and no evidence that occupation was ever intended. It was odd, like a ghost train.

Sophronia, thinking of her exhausted friends, made a quick decision. It was unlikely anyone else could climb down as they had, so they should be safe until they reached a station. Climbing back to the roof and down to the next-over footboard seemed like an excess of precautions when this coach was safe and empty, and she was exhausted. She put Bumbersnoot down on the floor to snuffle about in the dark. If he came across anything unusual, he'd swallow it either to burn in his boiler or to be kept in storage. Which reminded her of the present delivered by Mrs. Barnaclegoose. There came a clattering behind her, and she forgot once more.

Soap swung down and in. With the door open, the narrowness of the footboard was not such a challenge. One could simply dismount by falling forward into the coach. Which was what he did.

"Ah, good, you managed it," greeted Sophronia.

Soap gave her a dour look.

"I know, stuck with all us girls, must be tragic for you."

The others began leaning over from the roof and passing or throwing down the supplies, with Sidheag and Dimity, trained in stealth, trying their best to keep Felix muffled. There could, of course, be occupants in the other carriages, but they were either heavy sleepers or the sound of the train covered any noises made by the five new passengers in first class. Six if you counted Bumbersnoot.

They crammed inside the coach. As Soap had feared, it was a mite intimate for society standards. Sophronia closed and bolted the door, drawing the curtains over both it and the windows opposite in just such a way that she could peek out a corner if needed. From the outside the drapes would appear messy enough to have unintentionally rattled loose, to the

untrained eye.

The five sat down and looked at one another in profound relief. The three girls took the forward-facing bench. The two boys sat opposite. This seating arrangement ensured a respectable distance between them, one that even Mrs. Temminnick might approve. First-class coaches were *luxurious*. Although, after falling on top of one another in an airdinghy recently, such concerns seemed silly. And Soap still looked uncomfortable with the arrangement.

Save Sidheag, they were all still wearing masquerade outfits, without masks, hair sticking up or fallen loose.

"We must look a treat," said Dimity into the exhausted silence.

Sophronia shook herself. "You're right, we should change. Best if we look more like stowaways, in case we do get caught."

The boys rose and made as if to leave the coach.

Sophronia had no idea where they intended to go, perhaps outside to balance on the footboard or climb back onto the roof? She shook her head. "We should stick together. We'll have to trust you two to turn around and not look."

Dimity went white as a sheet, more terrified by this than the hair-raising ride they had recently endured. "Must we? If anyone finds out, our reputations will be in absolute tatters, so…"

"We must ensure no one finds out," said Sidheag, already unbuttoning her hideous tweed dress.

Then Soap, still facing them, went red as a beet at Sidheag's action and hastily turned to face the back of his seat, eyes screwed tightly shut.

Felix, after one startled glance, did the same. He did not look quite so embarrassed.

Sidheag continued with her changing while Sophronia upended the bag of clothes. She rummaged through for something that looked to fit her friend, realizing that they'd have to cannibalize the train curtain cords for belts. Dimity helped Sidheag remove her corset, tight lipped with disapproval. Sophronia envied her the fact that she didn't have to wrap. Sidheag donned a shirt, vest, and trousers. Her boots were already so practical as to be almost masculine. Once out of her dress, she looked very like a boy, lanky with mannish features. Were it not for her long hair, she could pass without further mussing.

“We could cut it,” said Sophronia, who already had out her sewing shears to strip a petticoat for chest wraps.

She would never have thought Sidheag vain, but the girl looked genuinely perturbed at the suggestion.

“It’s her best feature,” protested Dimity.

Sidheag said, very quietly, “Captain Niall prefers long hair.”

“Oh, does he indeed?” said Sophronia, struggling to keep a straight face. “We’ll leave it, then.”

Dimity whispered, “How did you find that out?”

Without answering, Sidheag plaited and wound her hair up tight to her head. She pulled a cap on over it and transformed, suddenly, into a rather good-looking young man. She then helped unbutton Dimity’s beautiful gold gown. Sophronia stuffed it unceremoniously into the sack, which made Dimity look as if she might start crying. She refused to remove her stays, and chose some of the baggiest of the clothing so that she looked like a strangely top-heavy vagabond. Even in plaits, Dimity’s hair was quite poufy and held her cap out about her head. In the end, she resembled nothing more than a walking, talking mushroom. With her round, feminine face, one really had to squint to see her as male.

After brief discussion, they added a smudge of mustache to her upper lip with a bit of coal from Bumbersnoot’s stores. It wasn’t much help.

Sophronia stripped self-consciously, including her stays, before pulling on a shirt and jodhpurs. She had a passing good figure, but fortunately it wasn’t overly generous. She put her masquerade apron back on, instead of a waistcoat. Over that she added a tweed hunting jacket. It made her look like a butcher’s boy with a pocket obsession, but she liked how useful the apron was and wasn’t going to let it go.

“You can turn back ’round.”

The boys did so. Felix snickered at Dimity’s appearance, but Soap was still so embarrassed he kept looking anywhere but at them.

“What’s he up to?” Felix asked, pointing to where Bumbersnoot, near the door, made a funny little circle of discomfort.

“Oh, dear,” said Dimity. “Look away, do.”

Felix did not, as there was nowhere else safe to look, watching with interest as Bumbersnoot squatted and ejected, out his back side, the gift Mrs. Barnaclegoose had passed along. It was a most undignified and

anatomically accurate expulsion mechanism.

"Oh, yes," said Sophronia, reaching for it.

A bladed fan! Far nicer than the ones they had practiced with, this one was steel, with filigree handle elements, making it lighter and more delicate looking. It had a leather sheath that was beautifully embossed, looking almost like a piece of mysteriously large and elaborate jewelry as it hung from a little strap with a tassel.

"That's a pretty thing," said Felix. "Gift from an admirer?"

Sophronia wasn't going to give him any quarter. "I have a certain connection in London," she said. Letting him think in terms of suitor rather than prospective patron.

Felix's face went slightly sour. He clearly didn't like the idea of a London rival, a man already finished with his education, based in town, with funds to spare.

Sophronia had no idea how Lord Akeldama knew she wanted one. Nor how he knew Mrs. Barnaclegoose could get it to her. The dandy vampire had more than a few tricks to go along with all those fancies. However, she was rather in love, she hated to admit. With the fan, of course, not Lord Akeldama. She tested the edge, finding it beautifully sharp, and then carefully fastened the guard and put the bladed fan away in one of her larger pockets.

"What kind of connection?" pried Felix.

"A sharp one," answered Sophronia coyly.

"Come with me to London, Ria. I'll buy you such pretty things."

Soap jumped in, gruff and annoyed. "Miss Temminnick doesn't want your kind of patronage, Pickleman's get."

"Did I say anything about patronage?"

Sophronia sighed. "Hush up and change, please, both of you."

Then it was the young ladies' turn to look away while the boys stripped. Sophronia peeked—of course she peeked!—and she wouldn't have been surprised if the other two did as well. Sidheag, raised by werewolves, had seen men bare before, but these were *boys* their own age—how could she resist? Besides, Sidheag wasn't shy. Dimity rarely had the advantage, or disadvantage, but she was terribly curious about the opposite sex. Soap, Sophronia noted, had layered on more muscle than she'd expected. Felix seemed slight, white, and lean next to the sootie. Sophronia was ashamed of

herself, but that didn’t stop her from taking a great number of mental notes. She’d been well trained in how to do so. It would be a while before she and Dimity could discuss the matter, and she wanted as much detail as possible for the purposes of compared opinions.

All too soon, Soap’s dandy and Felix’s jester costumes were added to the sack. The first-class coach now looked, by all accounts, to be occupied by a gang of scruffy lads bent on postal fraud or meat pie heists.

It had been a long night and everyone was glassy eyed—particularly Sidheag, who’d undertaken an entire wolf-ride from London before their balloon excursion. They agreed to take watches. Sophronia, still excited by the hunt and accustomed to prowling about late, chose first watch. She added, quite firmly, that she would take it with Soap, to forestall any bickering. Dimity stretched out on one bench and Sidheag on the other, with Felix gallantly taking the floor in the middle, using the bag of costumes as a pillow. Bumbersnoot curled up comfortably at his feet. A fact for which the young man was no doubt grateful, as the mechanimal was an excellent foot warmer.

Soon regular breathing and soft snoring meshed with the clatter of the train.

Soap stood near the door, peeking out into the night. Sophronia, after an awkward silence, edged past Felix to look out the opposite window and see if she could guess the distance to Oxford junction. There was no clear sign of anything. Clouds had moved in, obscuring the nearly full moon. There was nothing of significance visible but damp black.

Sophronia returned to the door, standing on the other side from Soap, uncomfortable because he was uncomfortable. She examined his face, but it was closed off. Even if he wanted to talk, he didn’t want to do so here, with the possibility of three sleepers shamming and listening in. Sophronia wasn’t certain, but she thought he looked more sad than upset, and that confused her.

Casualties on all sides, she thought. *I get Sidheag sorted and now Soap’s gone sentimental on me.*

She tilted her head at him and tried a small smile.

His mouth twisted. He blinked slowly, looked away, and then glanced back at her.

Sophronia tried another smile.

He puffed out a short sigh, loss and resignation rolled up into it. Then he seemed to give himself a mental shake and smiled back. It was almost his old grin—only without the twinkle.

Then it was Sophronia's turn to feel lost and forlorn. Soap had withdrawn from her, and it was her fault. *Was I too tough when I yelled at him about turning claviger? It's only that I'm worried. He should know me well enough for that. Did something happen on the journey just now? Is he still overly embarrassed about us changing? Is it Felix?* Sophronia knew, at that thought, that she would lose Soap to the clavigers, if he were given half a chance. If not, he'd see her through finishing, because he was loyal, and then take off in pursuit of a pack. She wouldn't put it past him to go for Kingair. If they managed to get Sidheag ensconced, it'd help to have Lady Kingair vouch for him.

Sophronia couldn't have explained, if asked, how she knew Soap's intentions so clearly. But she did. She also couldn't have explained why it hurt so much. But it did.

They stood watch in a silence so awkward it burned the backs of Sophronia's eyes.

Transmitter on a Train

Sophronia woke Dimity with the firm shoulder grab of silence. It was a technique they'd applied before they even knew it was trained into intelligencers.

Dimity awoke quietly, automatically reaching beneath her nonexistent pillow for a weapon. It was an instinct ill suited to Dimity, like watching a duck eat custard. But sometimes Dimity was surprisingly stealthy. She would have to unlearn a great many things, if she actually ended up as a real lady.

"Your watch, my dear," Sophronia whispered. "The sun is almost up."

Dimity knuckled her eyes; only four hours' sleep, but she was willing to do her duty—true friendship, that.

Soap, still at the door, stretched languidly, looking exhausted.

Sophronia went to wake Sidheag.

"Let her sleep," said Felix's voice from the floor. "I'll take it. She needs the rest."

"Very gentlemanly of you, Lord Mersey," approved Dimity, offering him a hand up.

Felix looked at her aghast. As if he would accept aid from a lady! He wasn't in that sorry a state, although Sophronia was sure it had been an uncomfortable night on the floor. The kohl was smudged about his eyes and his hair was sweetly rumpled. Sophronia found it most disturbing—it made him look less aloof and more approachable.

Sophronia said, "If you're sure. You know you actually have to *keep*

watch? Do they teach you useful things like that at Bunson's?"

Felix gave her a dirty look. "I suspect Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott can demonstrate the particulars."

"I intend to climb up top to watch the sun rise, check on the airdinghy, and get the lay of the land."

Soap paused at that, before folding himself reluctantly to the floor. Sophronia had expected him to insist on accompanying her.

But it was Felix who said, "Is that wise?"

Sophronia answered, "The wise would never have left the ball in the first place. I'll be quick, and I want to retrieve my hurlie, my wrist feels bare without it."

Felix looked to Soap for support. "You aren't going to stop her?"

Soap said, "Kind of you to think I could, little lordling."

Felix glared.

Soap leaned back against the sack of costumes, head under the window, eyes heavy lidded, watching the door. He pointed at Bumbersnoot, who had moved to sit expectantly under a bench in one corner. "Can't be too important or she'd take him with her."

Sophronia felt a glow of pride. Soap understood her! And he trusted her. Why couldn't Felix be more like that?

Felix, strangely, took that to heart and raised no more objections.

So with Dimity and Felix posted by the door, Sophronia creaked it open and, hugging the side of the train, inched her way out onto the footboard.

It was wet and nasty, and had she not had practice on the damp exterior of Mademoiselle Geraldine's she certainly would have lost purchase.

Sophronia felt exposed and vulnerable. She jumped, trying to catch the top railing. She wished fervently for her hurlie as she missed and slid on the landing. She tried again, putting her will and strength into it, and managed to catch the railing and hoist herself up onto the roof. Strangely, she felt less exposed up high. As she had learned during her climbing adventures about the school, people rarely looked up.

The sun rose and the clouds lifted a little. She could see, far ahead on the horizon, the tall tower of a junction box. This train, unless she was mistaken, was not expected, and no one would be manning that switch. They'd have to stop, check it, and change it over to the desired direction. She was about to witness their hosts. Would they look back at the train and

see the balloon?

Sophronia crawled along the top of the carriage to the airdinghy, which was still safely strapped down. She considered knocking it off, and then decided it would make too loud a crash in the morning quiet. So she merely detached her hurlie and strapped it back in its customary place on her wrist.

She should have returned to the others at that point, but this was her first opportunity to explore without having to worry about their safety. She was dying of curiosity. What was the valuable freight in those middle cars?

She walked to the front of their carriage, jumped the coupler, and climbed across the roof of the next carriage. She moved softly and slowly, so her footsteps could not be heard by any possible passengers. She sensed that this carriage was as empty as theirs, but she didn't *know* that. In front of her was the first freight carriage. From the air she'd thought it looked like a cattle cart, but up close it was a shock.

The top part of the freight carriage was, in fact, completely open to the sky. It seemed to be transporting a structure of some kind, a horse shed or similar, which boasted its own wooden roof. She suspected that there was an entrance from the front of the carriage, but in order to get there, she would have to climb across that roof, and she had no idea if it was secure or not. She risked it anyway.

Cautiously, she crawled about, examining the shed for clues. There were some funny-looking protrusions out the roof. One of them like a big metal cuspidor, another like the top part of a tuba. Eventually, she found a hatch. It was made so that something from the inside could telescope out. It didn't seem big enough to fit a person, but she could fit her head.

She cracked it, careful to shield the opening with her body, worried that even the dim light of early morning would creep in and alert those inside. She put an eye to the crack and waited patiently for her pupils to acclimatize to the gloom. The coach was empty. She flipped the hatch open completely and stuck her whole head inside. She was now bottoms up, like a duck, on top of a moving train. She wedged her shoulders to block out the light so her eyes could adjust and see as much of the interior as possible.

She stifled a gasp. There *was* someone inside! Fortunately, the gentleman in question was asleep—slumped sideways over the arm of a chair, mouth slightly open, snoring softly. He was a very handsome man, with long, wavy hair and an oval face. He was dressed well. Almost too

well. It made Sophronia think of Lord Akeldama. She dragged her eyes away to examine the room.

The inside of that shed was awfully familiar.

Sophronia had seen something like it before, only smaller, on the roof of Bunson and Lacroix's Boys' Polytechnique during her debut at finishing school. Vieve called it a *communication machine*. Then it had looked like a deformed cross between a potting shed and a portmanteau. The appearance of the technology had not improved. The one at Bunson's was divided into two human-sized compartments, each filled to bursting with a peculiar assortment of tangled machinery. Sophronia would wager good money that those two were now represented, in larger form, by the two freight carriages. This one was filled with hundreds of tubes and dials. In front of the sleeping man was an upright glass box filled with black sand. Nothing was happening, but Sophronia knew the receiver of an aetherographic transmitter when she saw one. *An aetherographic transmitter on a train, oh dear.*

She wished fervently that Vieve were with them. Why had she brought a toff, a sootie, a lady, and a werewolf's daughter, but not an inventor? Of course the inventor would be the one she needed. Sophronia tried to remember what Vieve had said about Bunson's aetherographic transmitter. She had been so excited about point-to-point messaging across long distances. One thing was certain, it wouldn't function while the train was moving. Vieve had insisted it needed silence to operate. For another, it needed aether to communicate from one transmitter to another. So that fairly explained why the freight carriages had no proper roofs. Was this some kind of communication train? However, they were hardly close to the aether now, so there must have been improvements to the prototype if that were the case. Vieve was now at Bunson's, with the original prototype, and Sophronia wouldn't put it past her to have worked on an upgrade herself. Was this train from Bunson's, then? That explained its presence at Wootton Bassett. In which case, were there Picklemen on board?

Sophronia narrowed her eyes, straining to focus.

Is that…? Oh, yes, of course it is. Why should I be surprised? Sitting in the cradle next to the receiver, all innocent and unassuming, was one of the crystalline valve prototypes that everyone was constantly fussing over. She supposed that transmitter technology had probably evolved to require the

prototype at this point. Although it wasn't technically a *prototype* anymore, but was now officially *in production*. The vampires had tried hard to stop that, but Picklemen had won the day. And now, there it was, in use, bright as may be.

Sophronia gave the interior one more cursory glance, then withdrew her head, closing the hatch behind her. She lay back on the roof to think, eyes closed, enjoying the weak sun on her face.

Vieve used two crystalline valves to communicate commands from her hands to her sputter-skates. Perhaps the transmitter in the freight carriage is somehow steering the train in a like manner? Communicating with the engine? Why bother? And why put a man to sit watch over the receiver portion under those circumstances? It was very confusing.

Then a horrible thought occurred to her. *Felix! Does Felix know? Did he come along because Picklemen are involved? Did he know it would be their train in the station?* Sophronia quelled anger and a keen sense of betrayal at that idea. She tried to stay logical. She had no direct evidence as to who was in charge; no need to take it out on Felix, just because she didn't like his politics.

The train closed in on the junction box. Sophronia flattened herself to the roof and waited to see if a green-banded top hat came walking up. They stopped at the switch and the door to the engine popped open. A stocky driver with a gargantuan mustache swung himself down and lumbered over to fiddle with the switch. *No top hat. No green band*. Sophronia couldn't tell for certain, but she thought he was turning the direction toward London.

"No," said a demanding female voice from the cab door. "We aren't going back yet."

The man looked up, unhappy with this order. "But miss, we've not much coal left, we need a restock."

"Do it in Oxford," commanded the unseen woman.

Sophronia frowned; she was certain she knew that voice.

"But why? This is a *London* train. Besides, other lines will be starting up soon. We can't risk it, not on a popular track, not during the day. We'll be seen, or worse, cause a collision. We'll certainly slow everyone else up if you keep us at this snail's pace."

"That's enough," barked the voice. "Orders are orders. Oxford, my good man. The path is clear this morning, I checked the schedule."

The man muttered to himself but muscled the switch back over with impressive ease. This was a great relief to Sophronia; they wanted to go toward Oxford, after all.

Still, *that voice*. She'd definitely heard it before. Unfortunately, the lady in the engine room did not get out.

Luckily for Sophronia, the driver didn't feel the need to look up. Both she and the airdinghy remained unnoticed. She wondered if those were the only other people on the train, the sleeping man with the transmitter, the driver, his stoker, and the lady. Could such a thing be possible, all six carriages for four people and an aetherographic transmitter?

The driver safely inside the locomotive, the train started up again.

Sophronia retreated in relief to the relative security of their first-class coach.

Dimity and Felix were waiting for her, looking frightened and impatient.

Soap was still awake. He cracked an eyelid from his prone position the moment she entered. He evaluated her from head to toe and, apparently satisfied, went back to sleep.

"Where were you?" hissed Dimity. "Really, Sophronia, sometimes you are quite impossible." She sounded snooty in her relief. She sounded almost like…

Which was when Sophronia remembered who belonged to that voice. Pieces began to click into place.

"You've been gone an awful long time for watching a sunrise," added Felix.

Sophronia said, "Wake up, everyone, we need to talk. I figured out what the freight is, and who's carrying it. Now we simply need to know why."

Soap sat up and shook Sidheag awake.

She blinked at them. "What's going on?"

Sophronia wished they had tea. Tea would do them up a treat right now. However, without tea, it would have to be gossip.

"On the positive, we are definitely headed toward Oxford, Sidheag. Hopefully, there will be a northbound train we can hop there. Unfortunately, this train we're on is almost certainly a vampire concern. For some reason they've got themselves an aetherographic transmitter fitted with one of the new crystalline valves, and are relocating it."

"Gracious me," said Felix primly, "how on earth did you learn all that?"

“I overheard a woman giving orders to the driver. I recognized her voice. She sounds a little older and more cultured, but I’m pretty confident it was Monique de Pelouse.”

Sidheag gasped.

“Oh, dear,” said Dimity.

Dimity didn’t know the half of it. Sophronia cursed inside. Was Lord Akeldama in on it, too? Vampires could be very tricky.

However, her tone was prosaic. “At least we are familiar with her methods.” She explained for Felix’s benefit, “You met her on that trip to London. Older girl who was forced to sit at our table. Now she’s drone to Westminster Hive.”

Felix’s lip curled. “So sad.”

Sophronia, annoyed by Felix’s bias, found herself unexpectedly defending Monique. “It’s a valid option in our field, if perhaps not considered the most honorable. Not everyone has the same choices you have, Lord Mersey.”

Sidheag said, gruffly, “Unfortunately, she’s also had all the same lessons we have. So she knows all our tricks, just as we know all hers.”

Sophronia said, “Except that she doesn’t know we’re on board. Unfortunately, she also knows our faces. There’s no disguising ourselves from Monique.”

“When we stop, will she come check this coach, do you think?” wondered Dimity, glancing frantically around the interior. There was nowhere to hide.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t tell if there are any other drones on board. There’s a man asleep with the transmitter. Good looking enough to be a drone. Perhaps this mission is one of such secrecy they could only entrust it to the two.”

“Vampires always muck everything up,” grumbled Felix.

“You mean, just like the Picklemen do? Everyone has their own agenda, Lord Mersey. The key is to manipulate motivations without being sucked into them.” Sophronia looked hard at Felix, hoping he might take her words as a lesson, think about his own position for a change.

Unfortunately, he seemed mainly annoyed at her tone of voice.

“So much for our grand escape to Scotland,” said Sidheag, slumping onto a bench. The lack of sleep was catching up to her.

“Of course it’s the vampires.” Felix didn’t seem surprised enough by Sophronia’s revelation. And she was pretty darn certain it wasn’t simply his bigotry talking.

Sophronia gave him a hard stare. “Felix, do you know something you’re not telling us?”

The young lord shrugged. “It’s only that I thought I recognized the writing on the freight carriage as we approached, but I couldn’t understand what it implied until now.”

“You didn’t think that might be relevant?”

“Not until I knew there was a vampire drone on board.”

“That’s not the point; the point is, you might have said something sooner if you had suspicions! What did it say?” Sophronia demanded. Blast his Pickleman secrecy. What had they landed themselves in?

Felix was sullen. “Well, I couldn’t *tell* at the time. I didn’t see much of it. But now, I believe it was the brand of the East India Company.”

“Bloody Jack?” Dimity was intrigued. She had a fancy to someday visit exotic lands. Most girls wanted to tour Europe after their weddings. Dimity had plans to visit *places with more color*. After she caught herself a sensible, tour-minded husband, of course.

“Indeed,” acknowledged Felix. “My father has always suspected they had vampire ties.”

Sophronia nibbled her lip in consideration. “Has the East India Company, by any chance, put in an order for crystalline valves recently?”

Felix sneered outright at that question. “How should I know?”

“Your father is a Pickleman,” pointed out Sophronia mildly, again, trying to make him understand his own bias.

“He’s also a peer of the realm, and would never deal in trade! That’s Cultivator rank responsibility.”

“Picklemen have a ranking system?” This was news to Sophronia. She altered her attitude to one of inquiry rather than instruction.

Felix winced. “I shouldn’t have said that.” After which he clamped his mouth shut despite Sophronia’s big, pleading eyes.

She inched closer and tilted her head, looking at him from under her eyelashes. *Perhaps if I’m winsome enough, he’ll tell me more and realize how misguided the Picklemen are.*

Sidheag interrupted her tactics by asking, “Would Picklemen sell valves

to the East India Company?"

Felix nodded. "Of course. We haven't any *proof* of vampire backing."

Another slip-up, he said "we." Sophronia genuinely liked Lord Mersey. He was, frankly, adorable. But if Piston membership really was a means for recruiting Picklemen, she and Felix were ill matched. Sophronia bit her lip, looking disappointed.

Felix tilted his head at her, inquiring, the corner of his mouth tilted up in a "forgive me?" smile.

Why does he have to be so pretty? "You know, Lord Mersey, so far as I can tell, supernatural creatures come some good and some bad. Just like everyone else."

Felix bristled. "And the fact that they hunt humans for food doesn't bother you at all?"

"On occasion. But I'm not one to judge anyone's character based on diet. I myself have an unacceptable love of mincemeat."

Felix couldn't seem to help but smile at that. Sophronia could be awfully charming when she was self-effacing. "And the fact that we are apparently stuck on a vampire train doesn't trouble you?"

"Of course, but we aren't supposed to be here. Anyone would be in their rights to get annoyed."

"And the fact that the hive kidnapped Dimity?"

Dimity looked up, startled at being suddenly dragged into an argument. "Oh, now, see here."

"To counter a Pickleman monopoly. Frankly, it struck me as something the Picklemen themselves might do, were circumstances reversed."

"This is ridiculous. No matter what I say, you will always give them the benefit of the doubt. Even now!" Felix was losing much of his simulated boredom under Sophronia's pointed remarks, but he didn't seem to be losing his opinions.

"Just as you will always see them as less than human and unworthy of trust, or even decency."

"They are monsters," hissed Lord Mersey through gritted teeth.

That raised Sidheag's hackles because of the implied slur on werewolves.

Fortunately, a voice interrupted them before it could descend into an all-out fight. "Um, pardon me?"

“Soap?” Sophronia was grateful for the distraction.

“It’s not that I don’t find this conversation fascinating, miss. I most assuredly do. I never seen you tongue-lash a lordling afore.”

“Soap!”

“It’s the clouds, they’s lifting a bit, and up and ahead of us there’s a ruddy airship.”

“What?”

“Midsized, kinda disreputable looking.”

“Is it attacking?” asked Sidheag.

“No, I think *we* may be following them.”

“What?” Sophronia and the others rushed to the window and forced it open, craning their heads to look up.

Just as Soap said, there was a dirigible. It was a bit scruffy, like a fur muff left too long in the attic. If the train hadn’t been on tracks, Sophronia would have agreed that they were following it. They chugged along in its wake until the tracks inevitably steered them one way and the dirigible drifted in another.

“That was odd.”

“Coincidence?” suggested Sidheag, not sounding confident.

“I don’t believe in coincidences, not in our line of work,” replied Sophronia.

“Escort?” Dimity wondered.

“Could be that’s the reason we have so few drones on board—they’re all up there,” Sidheag said.

“In which case we’re in trouble because they’ll have spotted the airdinghy.” Sophronia looked hard at Felix. “Did you recognize that ship?”

Felix shook his head. Sophronia wanted to trust him but wasn’t sure she could anymore.

After a pause, Dimity said, “What have we landed ourselves in the middle of?”

Sidheag looked guilty. “Sorry, everyone, you’re all here because of me. If I didn’t want to get home…”

Dimity said, “Nonsense. Be fair to yourself, Sid, we all insisted on coming with you.”

The two boys nodded.

Dimity grinned and added, “Besides, did you forget? It’s *always*

Sophronia's fault."

Sophronia nodded. "Too true."

They made it safely into Oxford. Although the train paused several times, no one ever came to look into their coach, or noticed the airdinghy on top. With the others diligently on watch, Sophronia and Soap finally napped. Soap took the floor, scooting partly under the bench on which Sophronia slept.

"I'm used to it," he said when the others protested.

Sophronia's hand fell over the bench side as she dozed. She woke to find it resting gently on the top of Soap's head. His cap had fallen off. His hair was short and rough to the touch. Like the autumn heath of the moor, warmed by the sun. She liked the texture, her fingers stroking it without meaning to. Quickly, guiltily, she stopped herself and looked around. Dimity was staring out the window. Sidheag was stationed at the door. Only Felix had seen the caress.

Felix narrowed his eyes and looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

Guilt washed over Sophronia. She snapped back her hand as if burned and sat up.

In silence she began to lay out breakfast on the bench opposite. When she woke Soap, he had a small smile on his face.

They ate out of the picnic baskets. Soap had filched mainly meat pies, a smart decision as they were self-contained and nicely filling. There were jars of barley water to drink, the only thing he'd found quickly transportable. No one liked it—who did?—but it was better than nothing. The stores were generous but weren't going to sustain them forever. When they arrived at Oxford station an hour or so later, it was with considerable relief.

Unfortunately, the station was crowded with morning business. The unexpected private train was shunted off to the last platform. As they pulled in, window still open, they heard a station call boarding for the Deft Twelve Star bound for Glasgow.

Sidheag nosed out the door, excited, but they were too late. Four platforms over, the train in question pulled out before they could even come up with a plan to sneak off their own train. Sophronia grabbed her friend

and yanked her inside just as Monique jumped down from the engineering cab.

Monique, as ever, was dressed to the height of current fashion, her carriage gown one of tiered lavender taffeta with black satin ribbon edging around the bottom of the wide, full bell. It was exactly suited to the climate and the conditions of winter travel. Her blonde hair was perfectly done and she looked beautiful. She must have had very little sleep herself. It didn't show, which Sophronia found highly annoying. Monique was probably accustomed to being up all night, living among vampires.

The handsome man from the aetherographic receiver joined her. He signaled at someone down at the end of the vacant platform, and a human porter pushed through the gate and hurried toward them. Money changed hands and the porter scurried off again.

"No mechanicals," said Sophronia, squinting into the distant crowd in the station proper.

"There's track down for them," responded Sidheag.

"Yes, but not a one is running."

Felix nosed in. "Pardon, ladies, if I might have a look?"

They allowed him space. He slid in next to Sophronia, warm and sweet smelling. *Figgy pudding*, she thought again.

"That is odd," he corroborated, but offered no other explanation.

Minutes later the human porter returned, carrying two cups of tea and a copy of the *Oxford Whistler*. Monique and her companion, secure in their solitary state on the platform, made their way to a long bench under an overhang and sat with the paper and the tea. Their discussion seemed civilized, but despite Sophronia's ear trumpet and Dimity's lip-reading ability, they could not make out the topic.

Sophronia said, "Soap, now that I think on it, does Monique know you by sight?"

Soap replied, "Nope. Not one for fraternizing with sooties, that snotty Miss Uppity."

"Perhaps if you climbed out the off side and nabbed one of those big brooms? If they don't have mechanicals working to clean, they'll be hurting for human staff."

Soap followed her reasoning exactly. "Platform sweeper? Good notion. I can brush on past them; with my skin and these duds, no one would know

me from the scenery."

He climbed out the window on the far side of the coach, lowered himself down to the track, and dashed off.

Felix seemed troubled.

"What is it, Lord Mersey?" asked Dimity.

"I just realized how little I notice my household staff and the human servants all around me."

Dimity grinned. "Scary, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Very. I think I shall impress upon Father the necessity of raising their wages."

Sophronia tipped her head at him. "You think loyalty can be bought?"

"Don't you?"

Sophronia thought about her friends; money had never yet been exchanged between them. It made her feel sorry for Felix.

"Sovereign, sovereigns, or seduction," said Sidheag calmly, before Sophronia could stop her.

Dimity nodded in agreement. "It's our second lesson after the school motto: *Ut acerbus terminus*."

Felix looked confused. "What does it mean?"

"'To the bitter end,'" said Sophronia.

"Not that. I do speak Latin, thank you very much. I'm not a complete imbecile. I mean to ask, what does 'sovereign, sovereigns, or seduction' mean?"

"The three possible ways to turn a man to a cause," explained Dimity.

"What cause?" Felix was unsettled. His eyes on Sophronia.

"I see Soap," said Sophronia, wondering if Felix was afraid she could turn him away from a Pickleman future. *I'm trying*, she thought. *Is it working?* Self-consciously she shifted so the whole length of her side was pressed against him. His breath hitched in a most gratifying manner.

They watched as Soap appeared at the edge of the platform near the front of the train and jumped up. He'd found a big broom and pushed it about, his cap pulled down over his eyes, whistling softly, until he was right behind Monique's bench. He slowed and did a bit of extra sweeping.

"Don't do overmuch," hissed Sophronia, her nose pressed to the glass in worry. "Monique will notice. Move off now, move off!"

Monique, occupied with tea, argument, and newspaper, nevertheless

shifted and gave Soap a sharp look just as the tall, lanky sootie obeyed Sophronia's silent order and moved on down the platform.

Then the young gentleman looked up, noticed the sweeper, and yelled sharply.

Run! Sophronia suppressed the urge to scream out of the train.

Soap turned back and ambled toward Monique and her companion, dragging the broom casually behind him.

Everyone in the coach held their breath, even Felix, who didn't give two figs if Soap got caught. He was no doubt worried that Soap might give them away. Felix probably believed that sooties had no honor.

Instead of grabbing him, or yelling for the constable, or making any other threatening movement, the man signaled Soap forward.

Monique ignored Soap entirely.

The man asked Soap something, hands spread.

Soap shook his head.

The man got upset, throwing his paper down to the ground in annoyance.

Soap tipped his hat at them politely and returned to sweeping.

Monique and her associate abandoned their teacups on the bench and returned to the train.

"Drop!" hissed Sophronia.

Watching from the coach door window, they all ducked as Monique faced them for a moment. Had she seen the balloon basket on the roof?

Apparently not.

The stowaways popped back up in time to watch the man hand Monique into the cab before returning to the transmitter carriage.

They turned away in time to see Soap reach down and swig the leftover tea.

Felix and Dimity both made noises of disgust. Imagine drinking someone else's leavings? How humiliating!

Then Soap hurriedly swept the rest of the platform, before disappearing 'round the front of the train.

TRAIN-NAPPING

Sophronia trusted in Soap's abilities to get back on board, but she was impressed with his speed. He reappeared only a few minutes later, squirming through the window, looking chipper and pleased with himself. Also, he was bolstered by pilfered tea.

Sophronia couldn't help glancing at Felix. She knew that all he saw was a dark-skinned boy who drank someone else's leavings, like a beggar. She felt hot behind the ears. Why had Soap done such a thing in front of everyone?

She shook it off. She might have done it herself, if no one had been watching. She was *that* in need of tea.

"What did you hear?" she asked.

"They were arguing over the morning paper. She said something about the need for greater range. He said that range was never discussed. She said that didn't matter, that they would get blamed regardless and that she would make sure they knew he was at fault. Then he waved the paper and said he'd made it possible to get this far. Then she said it wasn't their choice to question orders and that they would have to keep trying. That was it."

"What did he say to you, when you spoke directly?" asked Sophronia.

"That was the strangest part. He asked about the mechanicals in Oxford."

"The mechanicals? Why, are they not working?"

"That's just it, he didn't explain."

"So what did you say?"

“I asked if I looked like my family could afford mechanicals. He got hot under the collar and said he thought I might pay attention to the world around me and threw the paper on the ground. Then the driver signaled for them to get back aboard.”

Sophronia nibbled her lip in thought.

Soap looked disappointed, as if he wanted something more from her than just lip nibbles. Then again…

“I brought you a present.” With a flourish, Soap pulled the morning paper out of his shirt front. He must have lifted it while drinking the tea and stashed it when they ducked for cover.

Sophronia grinned. His drinking the abandoned beverage was entirely forgiven.

“Good on you!” said Sidheag, slapping Soap companionably on the back.

Both Felix and Dimity looked askance at such familiarity. Dimity was concerned with Sidheag’s dignity, Felix with the dignity of the peerage. Lady Kingair should not go around touching sooties!

Sidheag was oblivious. “What does it say?”

Soap handed the *Oxford Whistler* to Sophronia without answering.

Sophronia opened it eagerly, reading the headlines. There was an announcement of the wedding of Jemima Smackadee to Wilfred Corkin, some threatened occupation of the Danubian Principalities, and concerns over staff repairs. It was frustrating; nothing seemed directly tied to the conversation Soap had overheard, nor the aetherographic transmitter on the train.

Dimity sat next to her on the bench, reading as well. Felix and Sidheag took the opposite side of the paper. Sophronia held it up so they could all read at once, scanning for relevant information. Soap, without having to be asked, took up a position at the door to keep watch. After lessons with Sophronia, he could read a little, but not well. He was only on the second-level primers.

The train lurched and began to pull out of the station.

Sophronia caught Sidheag’s eye. If they didn’t go northward, then they’d be headed to London. Sidheag would blame Sophronia for their not switching trains. Sophronia knew it and accepted responsibility. Sidheag ought to have been her priority. They should have gotten off along with

Soap and left Monique and the vampires to their own devices. They could have pooled their resources to pay for a northbound ticket for Sidheag without them. But now?

Sophronia admitted to herself that perhaps she was following this new trail of intrigue because it might delay Sidheag's departure. The more she thought about it, the more she worried about her friend's choice. Should Sidheag really hole up with a pack of traitorous werewolves? Chugging across the countryside with an aetherographic transmitter might give Sidheag a chance to rethink her options. *Then again, if I were in Sidheag's shoes, I wouldn't want anyone to delay me or question my judgment.* Feeling guiltier, Sophronia went back to reading the paper.

Felix, sitting opposite her, leaned all the way forward to read the fine print. Did he need glasses? That was sweet. He reached out to straighten a corner of the paper, brushing her fingertips. She caught his eye around the side and he gave one of his little half smiles. She was trying to decide how to respond when his attention diverted back to reading and his face went ashen.

"What did you find, Lord Mersey?"

"It could be nothing.…" He flipped the paper and pointed out an announcement box. Sidheag came around the other side of Sophronia, and the three girls read the small section together.

"Well, ladies?" prodded Soap from the door.

Sophronia read out. "'The mechanical manufacturers Messrs. Brine, Boottle, and Phipps very much regret the minor malfunction of servant units experienced by the residents of northern Wiltshire last night. Housekeepers are advised that a return of the steam tax for the time period in question will appear during the next accounting cycle. Please accept our profound apologies for any inconvenience.'"

"That's what they call a bunch of mechanicals singing 'Rule, Britannia!' and then dying? A minor malfunction?" Dimity scoffed.

Sophronia said, "I wonder if the breakdown has spread to Oxford and that's why none of the station ones were working. If it happened after last night's incident, this paper would already have been in production. We'll have to check the evening rags for another apology."

"There's a proper article here." Dimity pointed below the announcement.

Felix sat back on the bench, crossing his arms over his chest, face sinking into its customary expression of manufactured boredom.

Sophronia read the article out as well, for Soap's benefit. "'Members of the gentry and other key families in several towns in North Wiltshire experienced an unexpected performance at midnight.'" She paraphrased, "He describes exactly what we saw with the dancing, although he doesn't name the song. Apparently, everyone's staff did exactly the same. Certain older models, or those not recently upgraded, were immune. The manufacturer won't say for certain, but inside sources hint at sabotage."

Sophronia passed the paper over to Dimity. "Mumsy did say she'd recently had Frowbritcher serviced. I wonder if that service included extra unexpected protocols?"

She looked hard at Felix. He seemed upset—why? They had all seen the malfunction at the ball; he could hardly have hoped they would forget. The only new information was that the malfunctions had extended over a much larger area than only Sophronia's house. What did that matter? What else had they learned? The name of the manufacturing company. Perhaps that was what had shaken him.

Casually she said, "Does anyone know anything about Messrs. Brine, Boottle, and Phipps?"

No one said a word.

Sophronia contemplated the initials *BBP*. Had she seen them somewhere before? At that moment, all forgotten in the excitement of the morning's events, Bumbersnoot tooted smoke at her.

"Oh, dear me yes, poor Bumbersnoot, you haven't had any breakfast. Anyone have something he could burn? His boiler will die down soon otherwise."

Soap produced a lump of coal. He seemed to like having them stashed about his person for Bumbersnoot.

Sophronia picked up her little mechanimal, petting him affectionately, even though she knew he couldn't feel it. While the others talked quietly about the implications of a wider-ranging malfunction, Sophronia fed Bumbersnoot coal. At the same time she surreptitiously checked the underside of one of his ears. There, branded into the leather, was a string of letters Sophronia had always thought some kind of illegible maker's mark. Now she suspected the letters were *BBP*. Bumbersnoot was a mechanimal

that'd come to her by way of the flywaymen, but she was sure he'd originally been made by Picklemen. After all, they had been around when she'd first acquired Bumbersnoot. Picklemen, in her experience, were very fond of mechanimals. Considering Felix's reaction, she thought it pretty darn likely that the company of Messrs. Brine, Boottle, and Phipps was a Pickleman front. But what did that signify for the "Rule, Britannia!" malfunction? Had the vampires triggered it to sabotage the company and discredit the product, sort of like a character assassination on an industrial scale? Sophronia thought that if so, the sabotage could have been carried out by this very train. It had, after all, been in a station close to her house, in North Wiltshire.

Was the aetherographic machine being used to transmit protocols to multiple mechanicals simultaneously, telling them to sing "Rule, Britannia!"? Why would the vampires reveal their hand to the Picklemen like that? Character assassinations were supposed to be subtle. Vieve had specified that crystalline valves only worked point-to-point. By rights, that meant that for every mechanical commanded to sing, there would need to be one crystalline valve inside the mechanical and a sister valve to do the sending on board the train. She counted on her hand. For her brother's party alone, with twelve mechanicals, that meant twelve companion valves on the train. Yet she had seen only one in the freight car. Perhaps the other freight carriage was absolutely full of valves?

Sophronia's mind buzzed. She said, "It's possible that the very train we are on is responsible for all this madness."

Sidheag waved the paper about. "How do you figure that?"

"It's too conveniently in the right place at the right time. Plus, vampires are open in their mistrust of mechanicals. I think the operatic performance may have been some kind of test."

Dimity said, "Would they be so bold as to run a test like that in front of everyone?"

"I wondered the same thing. Perhaps the test was a mistake?"

Soap said, "Monique did say something about *range*. Perhaps the mistake was that it didn't take out more mechanicals? Or that it hit too many?"

They looked at each other in silence for a long moment.

"Is it possible that the vampires are trying to take control of all

mechanicals, throughout England?" Sophronia wondered, looking at Felix.

Felix said, his voice soft, "Of course it's possible. *Anything* is possible with vampires."

Sophronia thought of her bladed fan, a gift from a vampire. Was Lord Akeldama trying to buy her cooperation? Though he was a rove, and unattached to a hive, he could be acting in the interests of all vampire-kind. "There is another possibility. They could be trying to discredit mechanicals and through them the new crystalline valve technology. Remember, vampires missed out on the monopoly."

Felix liked this guess. "They get the politicians on their side."

Dimity said, in a small voice, "There are sides? Whose side are we on?"

"The werewolves," said Sidheag instantly.

"Goodness, are they involved, too?" wondered Sophronia, trying to fit that into her various theories.

Sidheag considered. "Vampires and werewolves aren't particularly friendly, but they will band together against an antisupernatural enemy as needed." This was said pointedly for Felix's benefit, but then she returned to Sophronia's question. "However, in this case, I think, no. Werewolves are less likely to tinker in industrial politics than vampires. Plus, we've got our own dilemma right now, remember? What do wolves care for the politics of machines?"

Felix shot back with, "Yet it's interesting that the vampires are making this power play right after one of the most powerful packs in Britain has been fractured beyond repair. Isn't it? Perhaps they want to take advantage of the dewan's distraction."

"Are you implying that the vampires somehow caused it? I think that highly unlikely," objected Sophronia.

"Lady Linette always says there are no coincidences, only opportunities," said Dimity, trying to play the peacekeeper.

"If anyone is likely to take advantage of this kind of situation, it's the Picklemen," said Sophronia.

"What does *that* mean?" demanded Felix, for some reason annoyed. "Do you support vampires against Picklemen?"

Vexed by such a direct questioning of her loyalties, especially when she felt she had made her thoughts plain, Sophronia took the unprecedented step of stating her position outright. "I support balancing out power.

Perhaps you might want to think about the broader scope yourself."

"Vampires have enough power already," hissed Felix.

"Would you please try to be logical, without prejudice?" Sophronia couldn't help it; some of her frustration with Felix's myopic perspective leaked out. *Why isn't he trained like we are, to think about motives and manipulation? Why doesn't he understand that this damages my affection for him?*

Felix was having none of it, although he kept his voice low. "As if you weren't prejudiced against Picklemen."

If Sophronia had had a temper, it would have flared up at that accusation. As it was, she only gave Felix a pitying smile. "They destroyed my mother's gazebo and tried to kill me with a huge mechanimal. Then again, the vampires kidnapped and nearly killed Dimity. For that matter, the werewolves just attempted treason. *Everyone* is bloody handed. That's my point."

"Sophronia, language!" barked Dimity.

"Whose side are we on, then?" reiterated Soap, mildly, looking strangely cheered by the dissent among his traveling companions. He watched Sophronia and Felix bickering with something bordering on delight.

Sophronia was wondering that herself. *Perhaps I'm better off making a patron of the queen like Mrs. Barnaclegoose*. Then she remembered that she had to hold this whole impromptu expedition together, and that they were still hiding out in an enemy train. They all needed a patron right now. She drew herself up.

"We are on Sidheag's side," she said firmly.

"Well, thank you very much, Sophronia," said Sidheag. "But I'd rather not take responsibility, if I don't have to."

"Then we are on the side of curiosity and evenhandedness. Once we know what's really going on, then we choose."

"That's a very murky position," objected Felix.

"So's the weather. But this is England, we must learn to live with uncertainty."

Their train did not head to London, but trundled roughly northward on one of the lesser-used regional tracks, out of the way of faster engines. Sidheag

occasionally looked longingly across the landscape, where black smoke indicated a faster locomotive, but she didn't say anything about it. At least they were moving in the general direction of Scotland, even if it was at a snail's pace. Occasionally they paused before starting up again, probably so that the transmitter could be used.

Around noon they stopped for twenty minutes at a station so tiny there was no point in Sidheag's jumping down and taking a risk by waiting for another train. Any train that came through would be, if possible, slower than the one they were already on. The only interesting thing was the continued absence of station mechanicals. Had they broken down again, or were people now scared to use them?

"If this goes on for too long, at too many stations and wealthy households, there will be a public outcry," said Dimity.

The group was getting a little lax about security. Someone still stood watch at the door, but it really seemed that no one else was on the train. When they paused, only Monique, the drone with the transmitter, or the driver was ever visible, although presumably there must be a stoker. No one was interested in checking the last carriage. Why was it even attached? To make the train look larger and more important?

Sophronia agreed with Dimity. "Mumsy couldn't manage the household if Frowbritcher stopped functioning. She uses him for practically everything. That's why she's so diligent about maintenance. If he's still down today, the house will be in chaos."

Sidheag said, "Rather dependent, isn't that?"

Sophronia only shrugged.

"Doesn't Kingair keep mechanicals?" asked Dimity.

"No, we keep clavigers for the dirty jobs. The castle is far too old to lay tracks."

Felix bristled at Sidheag's implications.

Sophronia suspected that Duke Golborne's residence, both in the country and in town, was littered with tracks. Felix seemed like the type to come from the sort of family that kept a mechanical for every whim. *Perhaps his ideals are more entrenched than I thought. A true test of my persuasive abilities!*

Felix defended the status quo. "People wouldn't need so many tracks if the supernatural politicians stopped restricting mechanical development.

After all, mechanimals don’t need tracks, but free rollers are illegal. It was the potentate that pushed that piece of legislation through.”

Sophronia frowned. “Are you saying tracks are no longer necessary?”

“Might be implying it, but I’m not saying it.” Felix looked smug.

Sophronia thought of Bumbersnoot. He operated without tracks and was illegal. But he also wasn’t very big and wasn’t, by most standards, useful. Yet correlate track-free motion to the idea that mechanicals might be controlled by a distant third party via the crystalline valves? Sophronia felt very uncomfortable. She could almost see where the vampires were coming from.

Speculation died down after that and things got extremely dull. The day was gray and drizzly. The train moved slowly north. They played cards; Felix had some in an inside pocket. They bickered about inconsequential things. They were all getting a bit tetchy after being trapped in a coach for so long.

Around teatime Dimity threw down her cards petulantly. “Sophronia, you never warned me adventuring would be so dull and tea-less.”

“No, but Lady Linette did. She said when one was stalking a mark that great patience was required.”

“I missed that bit.” Dimity leaned back. “What I wouldn’t give for a nice pot of Assam with some of those little cream puffs with the sugar on top. This isn’t the life for me. It really isn’t.” She looked most unhappy. It lent her ridiculous getup an air of self-sacrifice. She made for such an unconvincing boy.

Felix looked at Dimity, intrigued. “I thought all of Mademoiselle Geraldine’s girls wanted to be intelligencers.”

“Do all of Bunson’s boys want to be evil geniuses, Lord Mersey?” Dimity responded, knowing with confidence that this was not the case. Her own brother objected to the principles of his school, and mooched through his studies in a very nonevil way.

“No, I suppose not. Then why bother?”

Dimity grimaced. “You haven’t met my mother.”

“No, I haven’t had that pleasure.”

“I’d avoid it if I were you.”

“Duly noted.”

“Dimity means to get herself married to a nice safe country squire or

tuppenny knight. Spend the Season in London and the rest of the time out of all intrigue in the countryside. Although lately the countryside seems very excitable."

"You mean, like a normal girl?" Felix looked not at all upset by this admission of limited ambition.

Dimity flushed and glared at Sophronia. "You aren't supposed to tell *a boy* that!"

"As if he weren't well aware of the marriage mart? If he isn't yet, he should be. Once he circulates in society, he's going to be prime nosh."

"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or not, Ria. You make me sound like a bun from the baker's."

"And a very tasty hot cross bun, unless I'm very much mistaken. Full of currants," said Sophronia, speaking for all the chaperones in Felix's social future.

Felix actually blushed.

Soap looked as if he might be moved to speak against such outright flirting. His face wore an expression of disapproval not unlike that of Professor Lefoux upon encountering something she deemed particularly frivolous.

Felix turned the conversation elegantly back to Dimity, saying gallantly, "Don't you worry, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. I respect that choice. It seems eminently reasonable for a young lady of quality." Was he purposefully testing Sophronia with that statement?

Sophronia couldn't say anything. If she objected to his support of the normal path, she would insult Dimity. If she condoned it, her own choices were in question. *Very nicely played*. She gave Felix a nod of credit.

Sidheag, however, took offense. After all, she was off to probable spinsterhood and a very abnormal life choice—nanny to a band of discredited werewolf soldiers. She would have argued with Felix, but Sophronia put a hand to her arm and shook her head. Sidheag jerked away and went to stare out the window, annoyed now with both of them.

We are exhausted by each other's company. Lady Linette had warned that such things were apt to happen at house parties. The only ones who seemed to be weathering the confining quarters well were Soap and Bumbersnoot. Sophronia supposed Soap was accustomed to being confined to engineering. Plus, he was content to let Sophronia handle bickering

aristocrats. Bumbersnoot, on the other hand, was disposed to enjoy himself no matter what. A very doggy quality.

Sophronia wanted to ask Soap's advice. He was unofficial mayor of the sooties; how did he lead them without constant dissent? She thought back over the course of their friendship, only now realizing how often he had given her counsel. Had this untenable romantic affection of his destroyed that as well? *What will I do without him? When he's gone off and turned claviger, I'll no longer have any balance.*

Soap saw her looking at him, her green eyes grave and pleading. He tilted his head at her in query. But there was no privacy to ask him anything. An uninformed decision had to be made. Fortunately, uninformed decisions were Sophronia's speciality.

Sophronia said, into the silence of discontent that permeated the coach, "Are we agreed that there are few people on this train, possibly only Monique and three others?"

"Sophronia, what are you planning?" wondered Dimity, knowing that tone in her friend's voice.

"Soap, how different are steam engines in trains from steam engines in dirigibles?"

"Not a great deal. I believe the basics are pretty much the same, miss."

"Sidheag, you did a bit of stoking when we were down with the sooties, yes?"

"Of course, you know me, I never mind getting my hands dirty."

Speaking of dirty, Felix gave Sidheag a very dirty look at that statement. "One simply can't trust the Scottish aristocracy," he grumbled.

Sophronia nodded, decision made. "Good. I think we should *steal this train*."

Possibly as a result of being restless, possibly because they were accustomed to her outrageous ideas, there was no outcry at such a bold statement. Sophronia was a little disappointed.

Everyone looked mainly thoughtful.

"That sounds reasonable," said Dimity. *Dimity, of all people!*

"We could get it going faster and straight toward home," said Sidheag, brightening up substantially.

Even Soap, the voice of Sophronia's reason, looked excited, if slightly peevish. "I've never driven a train before."

Felix only blinked at them all in silent horrified wonder.

They pooled their resources.

Sophronia, with all her pockets, was the best equipped. Dimity and Sidheag both had red handkerchiefs, lemon-scented oils, and sewing shears. Sophronia gave her shears to Felix and her letter opener to Soap, preferring to rely on her new bladed fan. There was some discussion over the use of the obstructor—was it better applied in the aetherographic chamber? Finally, they decided Sophronia should take it with her to the locomotive cab. In case they needed to stop the train in a hurry, it could, theoretically, seize up the engine. Although Sophronia had never used it on anything so large.

Soap said, while Sophronia checked the condition of her two gadgets and strapped one to each wrist, “Funny, miss, how you’ve got the hurlie for the charge forward and the obstructor for the opposite, stopping an attack.”

Sophronia smiled at the symbolism. “I guess I do, don’t I?”

“Evenhanded balance in this as in everything else?” suggested Soap, mildly. Showing that he, at least, cared for her political beliefs.

Dimity shouldered Bumbersnoot in his lacy reticule disguise.

Only then did Felix throw his hands into the air. “Are you all completely biscuit minded? How will you steal a *train*? It’s on tracks, you realize? And it’s huge. It’s not as if people won’t be able to trace where you’re going or see you coming.”

They hid it in plain sight, of course.

That was Sophronia’s plan. They had thought the train might be transporting a circus when they first saw it, so they carried that idea forward.

Much to Dimity’s distress, this involved ripping her gold masquerade gown into streamers. Sidheag and Felix hung these off the roof railings on the two passenger carriages. Soap, Sophronia, and Dimity righted the airdinghy and draped the balloons to flutter off the back of the train. It did look rather like a carnival carrier.

“People won’t question the presence of an odd-looking train if it contains entertainers,” insisted Sophronia.

Dimity grimaced, brushing off her hands and looking around. “My poor

dress.”

Finished with the streamers, Felix climbed over, looking harried. “How will we get through stations, not to mention switches? You can’t know how to work those. And what about, oh, I don’t know, crashing into an oncoming locomotive!” His voice rose slightly in hysteria as he ranted. Sophronia was impressed; she hadn’t thought he had it in him to get so upset. It was kind of adorable.

“They must have timetables in the engine room? Mustn’t they?” said Sidheag. “We’ll stick to the regional tracks and avoid local passenger carriers. We’ll be perfectly fine. After all, Monique is already doing it. What matter if we take over?”

It was always nice to have Sidheag on one’s side. *Such a good egg.*

“And you think the vampires will let us simply trundle off with their aetherographic transmitter?” Felix scoffed.

Sophronia arranged the last collapsed balloon to her satisfaction. “If this were a hive collective maneuver, they’d have more drones on board. I think this is Westminster’s gambit. That’s why so few passengers. The farther we get from London, the less their influence.”

“This is obviously some shared delusion of ability. Unless”—Felix paused—“you haven’t been taught train stealing at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s, have you?”

“Not as such,” admitted Sophronia, with a grin. She was enjoying Felix’s discomfort. He so rarely got riled over anything, it was a pleasure to see his beautifully sullen face animated, even if that animation was frustration.

Felix ran his hands through his dark hair, sounding like a resigned maiden aunt. “It’ll all end in tears and coal dust, you see if it doesn’t.”

“Well, since we’ve already started, might as well continue.” Sophronia led her little band over the top of the passenger carriage toward the aetherographic transmitter.

They stopped before the coupler.

“Sidheag, Soap, and I will take the engine room. Felix and Dimity, you’re on the drone in that transmitter.” She overrode Felix’s protests. “Try not to kill him and try not to damage the machine. Both could be valuable. Your target is the crystalline valve. Get Bumbersnoot to eat it. Then if everything goes wrong, at least we have the one key piece of the puzzle,

and evidence."

"Has she always been this bossy?" Felix asked Dimity.

"Imagine being her best friend," replied Dimity.

"Crikey."

"Dimity, am I really? That's so sweet." Sophronia was distracted from bossiness by affection. She thought of Dimity as *her* best friend, but they had never talked about it, and she'd no idea Dimity felt the same. After all, Dimity was more popular and gregarious, and had lots more friends than Sophronia. Possibly because she wasn't so bossy.

"Of course. Sorry, Sidheag," Dimity answered with a grin.

Sidheag made a face. "You two are attached at the hip, everyone knows that."

To Felix, Sophronia said, "I only get bossy when it's important. Speaking of which, you should let Dimity go first, she has more training. Besides, and I do apologize, Dimity, but the shock value alone of your outlandish appearance might give you the edge."

Dimity's resigned expression, combined with the oddball clothing, gave her a marked resemblance to her brother in his younger, portlier days.

"Definitely bossy," said Felix, resigned.

"Oh, hush up, you like it," said Sophronia.

Felix grabbed her hand, and before she could protest, pressed a swift kiss to her arm above the hurlie. It was shockingly forward and very daring. Of course, Sophronia was delighted.

"I do," he murmured against her skin, letting her go just before she would have felt it necessary to jerk away.

Soap hissed a little, like an offended cat.

Dimity clasped her hands together. "Don't worry, Sophronia, I'll look after him for you."

"Oh, I say," huffed Felix, glaring doubtfully at Dimity.

So they left Felix crouched behind Dimity, ready to climb down and enter the freight carriage. They could only pray the drone had no gun. Sophronia hated to think her friends were going into danger on her orders. *The price of bossiness*, she thought.

But she had to trust in Dimity's abilities; it needed to be a coordinated attack. So she led the other two onward, over the two passenger coaches, hopefully empty, and then over the tender to the cab. The cab had open

doorways on both sides. She crouched on the right and Soap on the left, ready to swing down and in. Sidheag held position on the roof behind them, to follow as soon as possible, whichever side seemed necessary.

Sophronia waved her arm back at Dimity.

Her friend signaled acknowledgment. Then Dimity and Felix disappeared from sight.

Sophronia looked over and was about to nod to Soap when he pointed up. Ahead and above them, through a break in the clouds, was that same dirigible. The one Soap had spotted before. No time to think about that. Sophronia spread her hands in mystification and then nodded at him, once.

They each crossed their own arms, grabbing on to the top edge of the cab roof, then swinging out and twisting around feet first through the doorway to land inside the cab proper. Sophronia, trained in acrobatic execution, had had ample opportunity to practice as she climbed about the school. In trousers, it was easy as buttered crumpets. She had no idea why Soap knew the maneuver, but sooties were universally fit and Soap very athletic. He did get a bit tangled up in the doorframe, being taller than she, so his landing was one knee down.

A good thing, too, for Monique had taken a swing at him with a wicked-looking dagger. Her arm swooshed right over his head.

The driver with the huge mustache, who happened to be near Sophronia, was concentrating on the controls and only half noticed the intruders. It helped that the noise was deafening so close to the engine—the hiss of steam and roar from the firebox combined with clanging cables and pistons.

Monique hadn't noticed Sophronia yet. Her attention was on Soap.

Sophronia wasn't really a killer. She'd never particularly enjoyed the assassination part of her lessons, but she couldn't have the driver messing things up, either. So she simply tapped the man on the arm. "Pardon me, sir?"

"Ho, there, lad, what are you doing…?"

"I do apologize, but we require the use of your train."

"You what?"

Sophronia grinned at him, very cheeky, in the meantime sliding around to his other side so he was near the open door and she was not.

He was very confused.

Meanwhile, behind them, Monique and Soap grappled, Monique hurling

some very unladylike profanity at the sootie—what had she been learning among vampires?—and telling him he had no right, and to keep his dirty, nasty guttersnipe hands off her!

A small young man tended the stoker's box, the train's equivalent of a sootie. Hard to tell if he was a hireling or a minion, but he turned to face the fray, attracted by the noise. He seemed befuddled into inaction, but he *was* armed with a large shovel. No time to think on him further; Sophronia spun in against the driver, bumping him.

"What?"

"Oh, my god, what's that!" she screamed, pointing out the open cab door. There was real fear in her face, as if she were seeing a poltergeist.

The driver turned to look.

Sophronia shoved him with all her might. It shouldn't have worked—she was too slight and he was too large—except that Sophronia nipped one foot out and behind his leg, tripping him up. The SOS maneuver—*startle, obstruct, and shove*—was a classic tactic in which Captain Niall had trained them well.

Sophronia had never made it work before. When one was practicing, one's opponent always knew the startle was coming. But the driver reacted perfectly, and as a result tumbled out of the train.

She stuck her head out after. He seemed to have fallen harmlessly to one side. The train was moving just quickly enough that even a fit human couldn't catch up.

She yelled up to Sidheag. "Room for you now. Waiting for an invitation?"

Sidheag dropped down and swung in easily, no finesse but no wasted effort, either.

The girls turned to face the stoker.

He looked from one to the other.

Sophronia looked mean and scruffy and had just shoved his boss from a moving train.

Sidheag was awfully tall and imposing.

The stoker put down his shovel and put both his empty hands out in a pleading manner. "They hired me, young masters. I'm only along for the pay and the ride."

"Sidheag, if you would deal with this?" asked Sophronia.

Sidheag looked the young man up and down. “Delighted.”

She said, in her most commanding Lady Kingair voice, “You know, friend, I’ve always been terribly interested in the running of trains. If you wouldn’t mind continuing to shovel? I’m sure we can match your pay. In the meantime, if you could please tell me everything you know about everything, that would be topping.” And, because Sidheag knew well how to recruit a willing participant, she added, “Would you like a bit of kidney pie? We happen to have brought a few on board with us.”

Sophronia went to help Soap with Monique.

It was an awkward scrap of a fight. Soap was very conscious of his position in society, or lack thereof, and he was never one to strike a lady regardless of station. Therefore, he was trying to apprehend Monique without actually touching her anywhere indelicate or injuring her in any way. Monique was not correspondingly delicate. She had several more years of training than Sophronia and wasn’t half bad, even if she had left Mademoiselle Geraldine’s in disgrace. She was giving Soap a very challenging time of it, and she was armed.

Soap was mainly dodging out of her way and blocking her from doing anything drastic. She spat curses at him, lashing out with her knife. Soap hadn’t drawn the letter opener to combat it.

Sophronia reached into her pocket and pulled out the bladed fan. Time to test its paces.

“Soap, if I may?”

Soap glanced over at her in relief. “Oh, would you?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

Only then did Monique realize who had taken over her train. She saw right through Sophronia’s boy’s garb to the oval face and green eyes that had given her so much trouble at school. “Of course, it would be you, wouldn’t it? Always messing everything up, aren’t you, Sophronia?”

“That’s my sole purpose in life, Monique, to inconvenience you.”

The two girls circled each other warily. It was close quarters in the cab of a locomotive, particularly with three fellows. Sophronia was confident that Soap and Sidheag would, between them, get the train in hand. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Soap take the driver’s station.

Monique nipped in and slashed. A real kitchen knife, too, no pretense at some more upstairs-friendly implement. Although it did have a nice ivory

handle.

Sophronia whipped out her fan and shook off the leather guard.

“Had that lesson, have you?” sneered Monique.

Sophronia concentrated on the shift of Monique’s shoulders under her traveling gown, hints as to where she might move to strike next.

“I never liked the fan. Too flashy,” said the blonde, nipping in again.

In Sophronia’s experience, nothing was too flashy for Monique, so this must mean that Monique wasn’t any good with the fan. Sophronia had been practicing as much as she could since the first instance. This new one felt inexplicably natural in her hands.

She spun it in against Monique, a fancy wiggle and shift.

The girl’s beautiful blue eyes widened in horror. She backed up a bit.

“Careful with that thing, Sophronia, you could hurt somebody!”

“I thought that was the idea,” replied Sophronia, twirling the fan expertly around her wrist in a blur.

“No, peewit, that’s *my* task!”

Sophronia whipped the fan in, cutting away at Monique’s sleeve and nearly chopping the blonde’s hand off at the wrist where she held the knife.

Both girls gasped: Monique at the narrow escape, Sophronia at the very idea that she had almost cut off someone’s hand. Shocking.

Odd, thought Sophronia, *that if Monique were a stranger, I’d have a much easier time hurting her. But because she’s a person I know, even though I don’t like her, I struggle to be ruthless. Do all intelligencers have similar scruples?*

They circled each other, a little more hesitant now.

I could really hurt her. I’m better than she is. It was a frightening kind of power. Sophronia would have thought to find it thrilling. After all, this was why they trained so hard. But it was merely scary.

Monique nipped in again, unguarded, aiming for Sophronia’s chest—her knife sharp and focused. Sophronia might be a better fighter, but she wasn’t as bloodthirsty.

Sophronia ducked out of the way and slashed at Monique’s shoulder, cutting through the tightly stretched material there, above the older girl’s corset, leaving a wide gash. Sophronia had thought Monique would now be accustomed to pain, offering up her neck to vampires on a regular basis. Perhaps vampire bites didn’t hurt, because Monique dropped her blade and

began to wail loudly.

Soap and Sidheag turned, surprised.

Sophronia kicked the knife off the train.

Sidheag gave Monique a dirty look and went back to chatting with the sootie. She was shoveling under his supervision while he consumed kidney pie with evident joy. Apparently, that was just the thing to alter loyalties. It probably helped that Sidheag was genuinely interested in locomotives. Strange, for until recently Sophronia would have said Sidheag cared for nothing but Scotland and werewolves, with the possible addition of small dogs and cigars. Not that she'd seen Sidheag with either; dogs and cigars were not encouraged at finishing school. But one could easily *imagine* Sidheag with dogs and cigars.

Sophronia returned her attention to the unpleasant Monique. She snapped her bladed fan closed in disgust. "I had no idea you were so weak!" *I once thought this girl so very dangerous.*

Monique was petulant, clutching her shoulder. "It stings something awful!"

Sophronia rolled her eyes. "Well, there you go, stay away from bladed fans. Oh, for goodness' sake, shush! Here, let me bandage that up."

She did so, Monique fussing the whole time.

"Toss her or keep her?" she asked Sidheag and Soap.

"Toss," said Sidheag, without looking up from the boiler.

"I agree," said the kidney-pie-filled stoker. "That one is rotten to the core."

"Keep," said Soap. "She might have vital information."

"She's just like us, educated to resist." Sidheag really did not like Monique.

"Still," said Soap.

Sophronia was tempted to tip the annoying female off the train, but there was no knowing how useful she might be as a bargaining chip, if nothing else. She narrowed her eyes at Monique. "Which would you prefer?"

Monique shrugged, but her eyes slid to the door.

That settled it; Monique was staying.

They'd had lessons from Lady Linette in how to escape bonds, so Sophronia tied Monique's hands above her head and then looped them up and over a protrusion on the outside of the doorway. Monique had to stand

on tiptoe, occasionally swinging out the door and back again in a most precarious manner. That would keep her distracted from slipping her restraints.

After that, it was a matter of ignoring the girl's whining and learning how to run a train.

Soap applied all his prowess as a sootie to monitoring gauges, throttle controls, and the brake lever. The stoker proved most helpful and most taken with Sidheag. Sophronia wondered if he saw through their disguises, or if he was merely the type of young man who preferred the company of other men. Whatever the case, he and Sidheag had formulated a relationship, even though nothing was left of the kidney pie. He was knowledgeable about trains in a way only a young man raised on the railways could be.

They chugged along happily, stoking the boiler up to a nice clipping speed, one that made Monique squirmy and discontented, swaying back and forth. Sophronia left her to dangle for a good hour, to contemplate her choices in life. They all ignored her pleas and attempts at bargaining.

Finally, they had to stop at a switch. Their young stoker friend explained the niceties of signaling. They waited politely at the switch for a local train to toot past them.

There was a moment of terror, wondering if the train would stop to find out who they were and why they were running on a normally vacant track. But the other train sped by, showing no interest whatsoever and no inclination to stop. It was mostly second class and clearly had its own problems to worry about.

If anyone saw Monique, a well-dressed woman of quality, dangling from the doorway, they apparently assumed everyone had difficulties in life and moved on.

Sophronia hopped out to handle the switch under the guidance of the stoker.

They were back on their way, hoping no other trains were due across that stretch of track. Had the vampires filed this journey with the appropriate offices? There was only one person to ask. Sophronia approached Monique as they clattered back up to speed.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Sophronia, cut me down, do? My arms have come over all numb."

“Riddle me this, Monique,” Sophronia responded. “How dark are your masters keeping this journey? Did they file it with the controllers, or do we risk our lives on every new stretch of track?”

Monique would have shrugged if her shoulders hadn’t already been up by her ears. “That’s why they have signals, isn’t it?”

“That’s a very lax attitude when hauling valuable equipment on an important covert mission.”

Monique looked away out the window, past Soap and into the gray countryside. “Little do you know.”

“So why don’t you tell me? What are you really up to? Why are you intent on sabotaging mechanicals? Is it only to discredit the Picklemen, or is there something else going on? You realize society would crumble without mechanicals?”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far. I’ve been living without their use for almost a year. I assure you, human staff are perfectly serviceable. Perhaps not quite so strong, but better able to follow complex instructions.”

They were getting off point. “Why ‘Rule, Britannia!’?”

Monique looked genuinely confused. “What *are* you on about?”

Monique had either gotten better at playing dumb or she didn’t know that “Rule, Britannia!” was the song malfunctioning mechanicals sang. It hadn’t been named in the papers. Perhaps Monique was just executing commands without knowing the end result? But that idea didn’t sit right; something was off here.

“How are you doing it with only one crystalline valve?” Sophronia persisted. “I thought the technology meant you would need one for each mechanical.”

Monique looked confused again and shook her head. “I assure you, Mr. Smollet is perfectly capable of undertaking the necessary, with the system provided.”

Sophronia couldn’t help feeling that they were talking at cross-purposes. If anything, Monique seemed as frustrated with Sophronia as Sophronia was with her. Monique would enjoy avoiding questions and being difficult, if she knew what Sophronia wanted. Clearly, she didn’t.

Monique returned to griping. “Really, Sophronia, I knew you were thick, but how can you be on *their* side? Don’t you realize how dependent we have become on mechanicals? How lazy and slothful.”

“For certain, Monique. I can certainly see you washing your own laundry. Making your own tea. Dusting your own china.”

Monique almost growled. “No, you idiot, not *that*! Who controls the mechanicals? Who controls the government? We have allowed them too much power. We have allowed them too much control.”

“Funny, there are many who say exactly that about vampires. It’s all a matter of perspective.”

Monique actually squealed in annoyance. “And you have the *wrong* perspective. Let me down, you idiot, you’re going too fast. They are going to spot you.”

“Who is?”

Monique’s gaze fixed on the side forward window near Soap. “Too late,” she said. “Too late.”

Sophronia, although she knew it could be a trick, turned to see what Monique was staring at.

Out of the clouds, a little to the front of them, floated that same dirigible. Now it was much closer. It was sinking down, and it was heading toward them.

“Outrun them,” advised Monique. “Get away now, Sophronia. Shovel coal as if your life depends upon it, because your life just may.”

“Really, Monique, you can’t frighten me. Who are they, anyway?”

“Flywaymen, of course. Who were you expecting, the British Navy? Get away *now*! They aren’t going to take this lightly, and they are going to think it’s coming from you, because I won’t admit to anything.”

Sophronia only said, “I think they’ll see reason, if I explain myself properly.”

Monique let out a genuine bark of laughter. “My dear, even you are not that persuasive. You do know what we have been doing, don’t you?”

“Messing with mechanicals.”

Monique shook her head. “Silly child.”

Sophronia turned away, suddenly worried. “Soap, give her more power.”

Soap was already shaking his head. “Another switch, we can’t risk it. We’re getting in closer to Birmingham and there’s likely to be more trains sharing the tracks, even on rural lines.”

They had to stop at the signal.

The dirigible moved inexorably down toward them. It floated out of

sight around the front of the locomotive, so that when they started back up again they had no idea exactly where it had gone.

Soap stuck his head out the door to see, swinging wide so most of his body was arched out, holding on to the jamb with a free hand.

It had Sophronia's heart in her throat, but she knew better than to call him back or express concern. Soap would never question her abilities; it wasn't for her to question his. In this they understood each other completely.

"Nothing," he said, returning to his station as driver.

Sophronia shoved Monique aside and did the same out the other door, swinging out not quite so much.

Monique tried to shove Sophronia with her foot but was hampered by skirts.

Sophronia whacked her smartly with the backside of her closed fan in retribution.

The tracks began to curve enough for Sophronia to catch sight of…

"Soap, brakes!" she yelled. "Those fools landed on the line!"

Felix Versus the Flywaymen

Soap yanked on the brake lever. The locomotive screamed in protest. Sidheag's eyes went wide in sympathy for the poor train. She and her little friend stopped stoking and began scraping the coals out into the grate in an effort to cool the boilers.

The engine stuck out so far in front of the cab that they had no idea how much leeway they had before they crashed. They could do nothing more than slow the train as soon as possible. Sophronia was certain the wheels were sparking against the brakes.

The train squealed to a stop well before the dirigible. The abruptness of the halt almost threw Sophronia out the cab door. She scrabbled for purchase and hoped Dimity and Felix were adequately braced. She must rely on Dimity to act the capable intelligencer, and Felix not to let his ego get in the way of sensible precautions. She had no idea it would be so challenging to depend on the abilities of others.

No time to check on her friends; the dirigible was settling with the clear intention of disgorging occupants.

"Soap, will you stay with Monique?" Sophronia took in the sootie from under lowered lashes.

Soap's expression said much that Sophronia couldn't interpret. Then he nodded and returned to checking gauges.

Sophronia faced Sidheag and jerked her head toward the door. The taller girl nodded and untied the apron she'd donned to help with the coal. "It's all right, Dusty, you stay here. Mr. Sophronia and I got this one for now."

“If you say so.”

Sophronia appreciated Sidheag’s continuation of their masculine personas. Monique had called her by name, but it was common among the gentry to refer to a man by his last name alone. Sidheag had turned it nicely in that direction.

“Ready, Sid?” Sophronia said, following the angle.

They swung out of the cab and crunched along the edge of the track toward the downed airship. It was fully inflated, only loosely lashed to the track, bobbing softly. It was big enough to boast a propeller, and proper ladders over the sides, unlike the airdinghy. Its gondola was more barge- than basketlike, a spacious transport indeed.

They heard a shout behind them.

Felix and Dimity were running to catch up. Dimity had Bumbersnoot slung over her shoulder. Lacy dog reticule combined with overly large clothing and corseted waist made her, if possible, even more incongruous.

Sophronia and Sidheag waited for them.

“Hello, lovely one,” said Felix to Sophronia, looking pleased with himself.

“Everything greased your end?” Sophronia asked, looking to Dimity.

“Topping, we dumped him out, shortly after you jettisoned the driver. Must be leagues away by now. Here, thought you might want this.” Dimity patted Bumbersnoot, grinning mischievously.

“Oh? Has he swallowed something interesting lately?”

“Only the vampires’ crystalline valve frequensor.”

“Brilliant! You keep him for now? I’d rather stay unencumbered. Anything new to add to the puzzle of what the vampires are doing with that transmitter?”

Dimity nodded. “Only thing we could get out of that drone before we chucked him was that they were only receiving information, not transmitting it. That valve was hooked into the sketcher component. The part on which letters appear. The drone was monitoring it and then making notes on a map.”

“You mean they weren’t responsible for causing the mass mechanical malfunction?”

“It doesn’t seem likely.”

Sophronia nodded, reevaluating what was going on, her attention taken

by the dirigible in front of them. Two men had climbed out and were striding aggressively toward them.

Flywaymen. Sophronia had met their type before. They were dressed like the highwaymen of olden days in baggy britches tucked into tall boots, with sashes about their waists. Sophronia thought the outfits a bit much, but she supposed if one was a criminal outside society one could afford to ignore all the rules of proper attire. They had handkerchiefs tied about their heads, instead of respectable hats, and cravats pinned with onion brooches. It was a hodgepodge of styles that Mademoiselle Geraldine had explained was "only affected by the disenfranchised." *Really*, thought Sophronia, *you'd think with a Pickleman alliance some style would rub off*. However, there was no way to know if these flywaymen were allies or not. There were many flywaymen and they didn't often work together. Besides, who was she to talk fashion? Sophronia pulled her tweed cap farther down over her forehead, ensuring that her plaited hair was still tucked securely underneath.

Sophronia said to her friends, "Ready, boys?"

Felix said, "You sure you don't want me to talk?"

"Best not. Flywaymen have allied with Picklemen before. Your father could be involved. You could be involved."

"Ria, you wound me!" He seemed genuinely upset. "My father would never fraternize with the lower orders, not even for the good of the Empire!"

"And Picklemen do *everything* for the good of the Empire?"

"Of course."

"It's just that they think that the Empire's good means everything under their direct control."

Felix bristled. "That's not fair!"

Sophronia realized she'd made an error. "My dear Lord Mersey—Felix. It's not that I don't trust you. It's the Picklemen whose judgment is in question."

Felix looked a bit mollified. She'd also trapped him neatly into thinking about his own instinctual alliance with the Picklemen every time they were mentioned. She added a cautious "You do realize that you still have the choice. Your father hasn't made it for you."

He might have immediately reacted badly to that, accused her of trying

to win him over, so she added quickly, “That choice can always be to follow him. I know you are not the type to be told what to do by anyone.” She tried a little flattery. “Far too strong in character. I simply wish to ensure you realize you are making a choice.” She tried a winsome little smile.

That seemed to help matters. Felix looked to be actually mulling over her words. *Am I getting through to him at last?* “In that case, dear Ria, thank you for looking out for me. Such a supportive attitude.”

He leaned toward her and his tone, much softened, indicated that he now perceived her attempted influence as tantamount to wifely concern for his future. Perhaps she had taken it too far. He did have the prettiest eyes.

Sidheag interrupted what looked to become a lengthy flirtation. “May I remind you that we have flywaymen to deal with?”

“I can handle a few flywaymen. I’ve done it before.” Sophronia spoke with more confidence than she felt. After all, the last time hadn’t turned out at all well; Dimity had been shot.

They walked past the engine of the train.

Dimity referred to Monique in the doorway. “Saw your nicely strung-up slab of bacon.”

“Don’t insult bacon,” said Sidheag.

“I do my best work under stressful circumstances,” replied Sophronia.

The two flywaymen waved and hollered at them. “What ho!”

The flywaymen approached with amicable expressions on their faces. And seemed quite delighted to find the train apparently under the command of a scrappy band of larrikin boys.

“Young squires, how do you do this fine afternoon?” inquired one, with forced jocularity. He was a squarish, stubby sort, wind chafed, boasting a red nose in a round, pockmarked face.

The other, larger and angrier, had shaggy black hair and both hands shoved deep into his pockets, no doubt clutching some form of weaponry.

Sophronia was not one to abandon her lessons at a whim, so she played along by answering in kind. She forced her facial muscles and shoulders to relax. She splayed out her hands palms forward, tailoring her body movements to show openness and goodwill.

“Top of the day to you, my lords,” she said. “May we be of some kind of assistance? You seem to have landed on our track.”

“Now, now, young squire, you know that there is Her Majesty’s track,”

said Stubby, still smiling.

“Indeed, indeed it is. How right you are, my lord. But, if at all possible, we should very much like to use it and are in a bit of a hurry.”

“Oh, are ye? And where are you off to in such a tearing rush with such an odd mix-up of a train? Are you not a little young for such heavy responsibility?”

Sidheag stepped forward, hackles up, less kind than Sophronia and in more of a hurry. They had played this hand before—the one pretending to be nice, the other… less nice.

“I am Lord Kingair and this train is under my commission.”

“Oh, is it indeed, lordly lad?” said Stubby, and then, with his smile made over nasty, he showed his intent in a manner most unwise. “What if I were to say that we should like to borrow it for a while?”

“We should say,” answered Sophronia, placing a hand ostentatiously on Sidheag’s arm as if to sooth Lord Kingair’s ruffled aristocratic feathers, “that you already had a perfectly serviceable dirigible. What would you want with our train?”

The flywaymen chuckled at this impertinence.

Stubby said, “It’s more what you want with us. Why have you been following us these three days?”

Now, that was interesting information. Was that what Monique had been doing? *Following* the airship by train? Why by train? Sophronia puzzled over the matter. *I suppose it’s the only thing strong enough to haul two freights’ worth of aetherographic machine. Which means they must have been using the machine to track the airship!* That was why the train kept pausing—they had to be still to use the valve. They must have known the ship would float over populated areas, or a train would be useless. But it would also explain why they wanted to stay secretive.

It took only a moment for Sophronia to realize all of this, and she weighed the merits of telling the flywaymen any of it. Best, she thought, to keep revelations about vampires as ammunition for when ammunition was necessary.

“I don’t know what you are on about,” she said, smiling broadly. “We simply wanted a little play time, off Bunson’s. A bit of a lark with a train. We found this one at Wootton Bassett and thought, why not? Lord Kingair here had a hankering to visit the relations, and Lord Mersey, Mr. Dim, and I

thought we'd join him."

Sophronia dropped each name and each nugget of information with purpose, paying close attention to the reactions of both flywaymen. The revelation that they were boys who had jumped a train on a lark appeared to engender relief. The fact that they were Bunson's boys struck a spark of recognition in Stubby. The name Kingair and the intent to head north meant nothing. If they knew about the fuss with the Kingair Pack, they weren't connecting it to Sidheag. But it was the name Lord Mersey that really gave them pause.

Both flywaymen focused on Felix in a panic.

Obligingly, Felix stepped forward. He had gone back to his old looks and expression—a paragon of aristocratic boredom. His slightly full lips were too pouty. His blue eyes weighed the world and found it wanting. He slouched just enough not to mess with the cut of a fine Bond Street jacket—had he been wearing one—nothing more than the indolent son of a powerful man. Here was a boy accustomed to getting anything he wanted out of life. He thought he could have her just as easily, and she adored teasing him with the fact that he could not. In that moment, Sophronia again found him wildly attractive.

The flywaymen reacted to Felix's attitude. Even though they were criminals; even though they were little better than thieves of the sky; even though they were outside society—they could not deny hundreds of years of the British class system.

Sidheag was good at being autocratic. But her aura of command came out of an acerbic nature, from knowing that if upset she could eviscerate with her tongue. Felix, on the other hand, simply assumed superiority. One was compelled to obey him because of who he was, rather than what he might do.

It was wonderful to watch. Sophronia wondered if she could simulate such an aura of ennui and discontent or if it had to be trained from birth.

The two men trusted in Felix's stated identity.

"Lord Mersey," said the leader, "we know of your illustrious father, of course."

So they are connected to the Picklemen!

Felix tilted his head. "And you are tempted into contemplating ransom? You are thinking that here you have a train full of valuable cargo?"

The flywaymen looked more shocked than tempted.

Stubby said, “I know the Duke of Golborne well enough to realize he would not respond well to such behavior.”

Felix nodded crisply. “Good, we understand each other.”

And Sophronia was beginning to understand their situation.

Felix did not mention that there was a fair chance these flywaymen were, untraceably of course, in his father’s employ. If these flywaymen were up to something that would cause the vampires to track them, there was a good chance that something was a Pickleman plot. Sophronia’s heart wrenched. He had to know this, yet he gave no hint, not even to her. Despite the fact that she had been expecting it, Sophronia felt a keen sense of betrayal.

Stubby whispered in his shaggy companion’s ear.

Shaggy hurried back to the airship.

“Is that wise?” wondered Sophronia. “You are now all alone with us.”

Stubby laughed. “I am under the impression that you boys are not armed. Out for a lark, you said, didn’t you? Childish prank, stealing a train.”

Sophronia cocked her head. “Did we say unarmed?”

Dimity and Sidheag turned to look back at their train. The implication being that someone with a gun might be covering their backs.

The flywayman swallowed.

Sidheag added, “More like *borrowing* a train.”

Felix said, “You do *know* about Bunson’s, don’t you, Mr. Flywayman?”

“Most assuredly, most assuredly. One or two of our number once trained there.”

Felix wrinkled his nose at the very idea. “Hard times.”

Dimity and Bumbersnoot lurked to the back of their group. Dimity’s was the shakiest disguise. Sophronia was beginning to regret having let her join them. Why hadn’t she asked her to stay with Soap?

The flywayman was focused on Sophronia, Felix, and Sidheag, who each commanded, in their own way, an aura of evil genius mastermind, junior level. Remarkable, thought Sophronia, how a girl intelligencer could so easily become a boy evil genius.

The other flywayman returned at a jog and the two conferred privately.

The angle was extreme, but Sophronia thought she could lip-read the

second man saying something about Duke Golborne.

Stubby turned; his face was now closed and suspicious.

“It is not your style, we understand, Lord Mersey, to commandeer a train. And you still have not explained why you were intent on following us.”

“Pure coincidence,” said Sophronia. “After all, there are only two directions to go on any given track.”

“Who are you to know anything of my style?” snapped Felix at the same time.

Oh, thought Sophronia, *he is so good at pompous.*

Shaggy spoke for the first time, his voice a low growl. “We cannot allow our plans to be cocked up by a band of scruffy boys. No matter whose son they claim to be.”

The first man raised his hand for silence and said, “Have you any proof, young squires, that you are who you say you are?”

Felix stiffened. “I do not *need* proof. Show me any member of society and they will vouch for me. I am known well to anyone who is *anyone*! Besides, who are you to demand proof of *me*?”

Sophronia arched her eyebrows and watched him work. He might even be thought too good. It was so easy for him to be a toffy-nosed dunderhead. No wonder Soap didn’t like him. She wasn’t certain that she liked this part of him, either. However, it *was* working in their favor, so she allowed Felix to get more riled, prepared to rein him in only if he became careless with his information.

“You are but a schoolboy!” objected Shaggy, not so easily cowed by rank as Stubby.

“I do not need to be of age to have a presence in society!” Now Felix was genuinely annoyed.

Shaggy took offense at Felix’s tone of superiority. He removed a deadly-looking little gun from a pocket and pointed it at him.

Sophronia felt it time to interject. “Now, now, gentlemen, let’s not be impetuous.”

That statement made Shaggy angrier. “You’ve been stalking us. You got yourselves some pretty valuable equipment, and some pretty valuable young men, and you think, what…? We just gonna let you boys continue trundling along on your lonesome?” This second flywayman was nastier

than the first. Sophronia had thought Stubby the leader, but now she thought he was simply the speaker.

She appreciated Shaggy's directness, and, to a certain extent, his nastiness. She considered a judicious reply.

Felix, on the other hand, did not. "That is *exactly* what I expect! You have no cause to interfere with our travels. Leave that to the authorities, if they can catch us."

"I wonder what your father would say to that," said Stubby.

"Father! Father! What do you know of my father?" Felix practically steamed, like an overwrought boiler.

"Lord Mersey," said Sophronia, "that is *enough*!"

Felix turned on her, red about the ears.

Sophronia gave him a little wink and a small smile, trying to lighten the mood with flirtation. It worked. Felix clearly remembered not only their need for caution, but also the fact that Sophronia and the others were ladies in disguise, and *he* must needs behave like a gentleman around them, whether these flywaymen knew it or not.

His arms relaxed to his sides.

Shaggy came over all suspicious at this, perhaps because Felix, highest rank among them, had deferred to a winking Sophronia.

He said, "Come to think on it, he doesn't look much like the duke. Do we trust his story? These boys could be with the hive."

Stubby did not agree. "In those getups? Never have I known a vampire drone to be anything less than perfectly turned out." His gaze shifted over Dimity. "That one is a positive *sight*."

Felix bristled; now these criminals were insulting a lady friend.

"Who are you to judge?" he wanted to know.

"That's enough out of you, lordling," replied the second flywayman, pointing his gun with even more surety at Felix.

Felix had clearly reached his limit. Short tempers, reflected Sophronia, were a severe liability in her line of work. The young lord jerked in Shaggy's direction. The flywayman was tenser than he seemed, for he shot Felix, right then and there.

The sound of the gun seemed particularly loud in the quiet countryside.

BUMBERSNOOT TO THE RESCUE

Time seemed to slow.

Birds in a nearby hedgerow took off in a small cloud.

Dimity screamed.

Sophronia leapt forward to Felix, her heart in her throat, absolutely terrified. “Felix!”

He was rocking around on his back, clutching the side of his thigh, his pretty face screwed up in agony. It must be bad, for he was getting his clothes all over dusty from the track. They were borrowed duds, but Felix was generally respectful of all clothing.

Sophronia skidded in to kneel next to him. “Where were you hit? Felix!”

The viscount took a short moment to look into her worried green eyes. His own blue ones were leaking tears of pain, even though he was patently trying to contain them. “Curses, that burns! God, you’re beautiful.”

Sophronia forgave him the bad language in fine company. This once. She also forgave him the compliment. It couldn’t be too bad a wound if he was still able to flirt. Although the flywaymen were listening with interest and she was still dressed as a boy.

“Hush. Let me see,” she said.

Reluctantly, Felix took his hands away from his leg. “Kiss it and make it better?” he pleaded, winsome as an injured child.

“Are you delirious? They’re listening,” she hissed.

“Ria, my dove, I enjoy wearing kohl and favor well-tailored waistcoats. I already have somewhat of a *reputation*.”

Sophronia tsked and looked to his thigh.

Stubby said to his companion, “Supposing that actually is the duke’s eldest, do you think he knows his son is a prancer?”

Sophronia found the comment somewhat of a relief for her own part; at least her disguise held. Felix was remarkably untroubled by any questioning of his manhood.

She said, “See what I mean?”

He whispered, teeth gritted under her gentle ministrations, “All rumors will be put to rest once you agree to marry me.”

“Oh, of course,” replied Sophronia, “because it always works out exactly like that. You’re ridiculous. No wife ever cleared a man’s character, not without a great deal of trouble on the lower decks. So to speak. I should know, we’ve studied somewhat on the subject.”

“Ouch, darling, must you be so rough?”

“Just stoppering up your silly mouth.”

“I know a better way.” He pursed his lips at her. He was still writhing and crying, mind you. She was a little relieved—at least this meant he hadn’t been in league with the flywaymen from the get-go.

Sophronia finished her examination of the wound, and in the absence of brandy extracted her vial of lemon tincture—it was alcohol based, after all—and poured it over the gash.

Felix shrieked. And then, panting, said, “Thank you, fine physician. That makes it feel so much better, *and* all sweetly scented.”

“Stop your whingeing. It’s not serious. It only grazed the surface skin, see there.” Sophronia pointed, face free of worry. Underneath, however, she was thinking that it was bleeding rather much. He wasn’t going to be able to walk. She untucked her shirt and began tearing the hem for a bandage.

Behind her, Sophronia heard a faint sigh and a thud as Dimity collapsed in a faint. She must have caught sight of the blood. Wonderful.

Sidheag, bless her heart, held her position but had pulled out her sewing shears, which she now brandished in a threatening manner. It was odd for young Lord Kingair to be brandishing shears, but so much else was going on, and so much else was odd, this didn’t seem to clue the flywaymen into anything in any substantial way.

Stubby did not seem to be inclined to charge.

Shaggy was actually looking guilty at having shot a peer in cold blood.

Then from behind the flywaymen came a shout of rage. Someone had been watching their confrontation from the airship, probably through a spyglass. Now that someone climbed out of the dirigible and trotted in their direction with the sedate upright steps of a hound on the scent.

This man was no flywayman but a gentleman. His suit was of impeccable heavyweight tweed, perfect for floating over the countryside on a damp afternoon. He had paired it with a daytime top hat banded in green, and carried a cane with a spiked wooden top and a silver-tipped bottom, a sundowner weapon designed for killing supernaturals.

It was the band that caught Sophronia's attention. She knew that the flywaymen occasionally allied with Picklemen; now she knew that *these* particular flywaymen were hosting a Pickleman of their very own.

The man approached at speed. He had silver hair and a very authoritative demeanor.

Sophronia knew him.

She finished tying up Felix's leg. "My dear Felix"—she risked the intimacy of his given name as she whispered—"please don't tell him too much. I fear this plot is bigger than any of us suppose, and our safety is in your hands. Do, please, be careful, for my sake?"

Then she calmly straightened to face the Duke of Golborne.

"What a surprise. Good afternoon, Your Grace."

If Felix's father recognized Sophronia from their two previous encounters, he was very good at hiding it. Of course, the first time had been during a fight, at night, in a gazebo, and she had been wearing a ball gown. The second time she'd been dressed as a dandy drone at a carnival. This time, she looked like a scamp, with her cap pulled down and her body language that of a schoolboy, rather than a fop.

Besides which, the duke was understandably distracted by his son's being shot. Fathers were like that, even Pickleman fathers.

He strode forward and struck Shaggy hard across the face with his cane. Without waiting to see the flywayman's reaction, he bent over Felix. He did not kneel at his son's side. Dukes do not kneel on train tracks for *anyone*.

"Boy, are you alive?"

Felix blinked at him in genuine surprise. Perhaps it was true and he had never fully believed in the intimacy between his father's secret society and the criminal element. Here, however, the duke had come popping out of a

flywayman craft. He was either their hostage or their accomplice. And he had not wanted his son to know, or he would have been the one to contact them.

Felix seemed startled enough to forget that he had been shot, or perhaps to think it slightly less important and put on a brave face.

“Father? What are you doing here?” he asked, tremulously.

“Oh, no, no. What are *you* doing *here*? You’re supposed to be in school.”

“Technically,” answered Felix, “I’m supposed to be at a ball. Remember, I wrote you of the invitation?”

“Ah, yes, some two-bit country gentry. Odd acquaintance to cultivate, but you thought the father’s business interests valuable to the cause.”

Sophronia blinked, tempted to doubt all Felix’s attentions. Had he been courting her all along because of something Papa was up to in civil service? Then she realized—hoped, really—that Felix must have said this to get permission to attend the masquerade.

“Yes, but things change, as they do. It became necessary to borrow a train and head north.”

“Oh, it did, did it?” The duke did not look convinced. “And you interfered with our business why, exactly?”

“I didn’t know, Father. We took this train off a handful of drones.”

Sophronia risked a small squeeze of warning in the guise of checking his bandages: *Please don’t tell the duke too much!*

Felix ignored her and went on, “And they happened to be at a station near the ball, and headed in the right direction. So we took their train and bumped them off.”

The duke nodded. “And what happened at that ball?”

Felix frowned at this sudden change of topic. “Well, the two-bit country gentleman, I don’t think he’ll be all that useful.”

“No, I mean to say, boy, did anything *unusual* occur?”

“You mean the mechanical failure in all the papers?”

“Ah, so you read about it. Did you see it in action?”

Felix came over suddenly quite still and suspicious. “Father, what are you up to? What’s going on? Did you…? Was it…?” He trailed off.

But Sophronia put *all* the pieces together at that moment. The Picklemen had chosen her brother’s party on purpose because they knew Felix would

be there. They knew he would give them a full report if asked. Perhaps they hadn't known how wide-reaching the effect would be, or that the papers would pick it up. Or perhaps they had run that test again in the Oxford area, to see what would happen. But Felix's father, these flywaymen, they were responsible for all of it. And the drones, Monique and the train, they had been tracking them: gathering data, staying out of the way. Sophronia and her band had come in and messed everything up.

The train hadn't fortuitously been at Wootton Bassett, and the mechanicals hadn't spontaneously chosen the Temminnicks for "Rule, Britannia!" As Lady Linette always said, there were no coincidences, certainly not with Picklemen, simply an endless stream of increased probability.

Because she wanted confirmation, and because she hoped Duke Golborne thought her one of Felix's Piston cronies and thus safe, Sophronia asked, "You caused that entertaining malfunction, didn't you, my lord?"

The duke focused his attention on her. And because he, too, had training, he didn't give her the outright answer she wanted. He wasn't loose lipped enough, or he didn't have that kind of hubris. "Who are you? You're not one of my boy's regular associates. You do look awfully familiar, though."

Sophronia said, "I have that kind of face."

The duke's eyes turned to Sidheag and the prostrate Dimity. Bumbersnoot had righted himself and was nosing her in the side in a worried manner. "None of your usual companions, boy," he said suspiciously. "Are they even Pistons? You know I don't like you fraternizing with the hoi polloi of the aristocracy." He seemed genuinely angry about it; did he go so far as to control Felix's friendships? *How awful for Felix*, thought Sophronia, briefly distracted from concerns over her immediate welfare.

Stubby stepped in at this juncture. "Sir, there is definitely something funny about those boys. Particularly that one." He pointed at Dimity.

The duke glanced again at her fallen form. "That one is the least of my concerns—he's got himself a mechanimal. He has all the *right* connections. No, it's these other two I don't know."

Sidheag said, "I'm Scottish," as if that would explain everything.

The duke nodded, as if it did. "Yes, well, we can't all be from the right side of the country. Would I know your family?"

Sidheag looked uncomfortable. The duke was probably aware of the Kingair scandal. She scrabbled for the right kind of family to call her own, but Scotland was a funny place, progressive as a rule, mostly not in favor of the conservative referendum. So she dodged the question. “Probably not, Your Grace.”

That didn’t mollify him, since he had practically demanded an introduction. He turned wrathful eyes on Sophronia. “And you, little man?”

Sophronia said, “I’m one of those two-bit country gentry, Your Grace.” She bowed. “Mr. Temminnick, at your service.”

At that precise moment, Monique decided to start screaming.

The duke looked at his son. “And what *exactly* is that?”

“One of the vampire drones. We kept her for collateral,” explained Felix, happy for a change of subject.

“Is she always that noisy? Seems hardly worth the bother.”

Sophronia was growing uncomfortable with this encounter. It was getting beyond her control. She wandered over, with the pretext of checking on Dimity. Dimity seemed perfectly fine, although deep in her faint.

Sophronia pulled out her smelling salts.

Dimity sneezed herself awake.

“What?” she sputtered.

“You fainted and Felix’s father, the duke, has turned up.”

“Oh, dear,” said Dimity, accurately.

“Felix is well, thank you for asking, a scrape to the leg.”

“Oh, good.”

“But I think it is time we extracted ourselves.”

Dimity nodded. “And?”

“I’m sending you back to the train, with the pretext that you aren’t well. Tell Soap he needs to charge the dirigible.”

“What?”

“Oh, keep your voice down, do. They won’t let us actually crash. That ship must be full of some very valuable equipment. Just tell him to head at it full throttle.”

Dimity nodded and stood shakily.

Sophronia helped her up, all solicitation. She took Bumbersnoot for herself. If the mechanimal was going to confer credence, she wanted to keep him with her.

Dimity began trudging back toward the locomotive.

The flywayman with the gun, Shaggy, his face welted from where Duke Golborne had struck him, was having none of it. “Oh, no you don’t, young master!”

Dimity froze, then turned slowly back.

“He needs to recuperate,” objected Sophronia. “I suggested he return to the train for a snifter.”

“He can recuperate perfectly well right here,” answered the duke, turning back to Felix.

“Now what?” hissed Dimity.

Sophronia wasn’t entirely certain Felix could get them out. Or even if he wanted to. And she was under no illusion that, if they were taken hostage by flywaymen *and* Picklemen, their female natures would remain hidden.

“We’ll have to try something else. Invisible spiders?”

Dimity said, “Sidheag’s better at those than me.” She angled her back toward the duke and flywaymen so they couldn’t see, and gestured to Sidheag. She pressed her wrists together and waggled her fingers in a fair imitation of a spider.

Sidheag gave her a funny look.

Sophronia followed up by giving Sidheag the code for creating a distraction, pressing the first two fingers of both hands together in a quick, birdlike movement.

Comprehension dawned. Sidheag gave an almost imperceptible nod and then began to gyrate about like a madwoman, waving her hands around her face.

“Bees,” she yelled, “I hate bees!”

Dimity watched this for a moment before squeaking herself, adding to the distraction. “Oooo, eeek! Get them off!”

Sophronia unstrapped her hurlie, remembering what Soap had said about its being her version of a *charge*. She fed it to Bumbersnoot—her wrist felt naked without it. The little mechanimal obligingly swallowed it into his storage compartment, where it clanked against the crystalline valve already nestled there. If he had possessed the capacity to belch, he would have. As it was, he looked vaguely too full for comfort, whistling steam out his undercarriage in a stuttering way.

Sophronia set him down, pointing him in the direction of the train.

She whispered, “High speed, Bumbersnoot, forward, march. Go on, find Soap. Go to the train.” She waggled her free arm in a pinwheel, disguising her ducking down as an effort to avoid the mythical bees.

One could never be certain, with Bumbersnoot, which instructions he actually understood. Or chose to follow. Sophronia had, after all, rather stolen him. He hadn’t exactly come with a protocol proclamation pamphlet. However, something she said must have clicked into his operation wheels, for he began skittering down the track on his stubby little legs in a rapid and direct approach to the locomotive. How he might get Soap’s attention from the cab was a mystery, but his small metal form was stealthy enough to be ignored by the enemy. Either that or because he was a mechanimal, he was deemed nonthreatening.

Sophronia began her own fit in earnest, waving off bees. The three girls used the distraction to back—or, more correctly, gyrate—away from the duke, Felix, and the two confused flywaymen.

And then, delightful music to the ear, Sophronia heard the dulcet sounds of a locomotive cranking to life.

A Rousing Game of Marbles

The duke noticed that there was a train heading slowly but inexorably in their direction. “What’s going on, boys?” he shouted over the resulting hubbub.

Sophronia said, “Sorry, Felix, but you’re in safe hands now. I figure you don’t want to stay with us, at this point.”

“Mr. Temminnick, what are you about?” Felix’s voice was deeply suspicious. He leaned up on one elbow to see her. The three girls had managed to wiggle impressively far.

Sophronia thought he looked heart-wrenchingly vulnerable.

Then he turned to the duke. “Father?”

Sophronia immediately regretted any sympathetic feelings.

The train moved relentlessly toward them, picking up speed.

Felix lay across the tracks.

Sophronia said, “Sir? You might want to move your son.” She paused, significantly. “And your dirigible.”

“You wouldn’t!” the duke protested. “Stop this immediately! How on earth did you get a message to your driver? You’ve been here the whole time. What is going on?” He turned to glare at Felix. “Son, order this little friend of yours to stop. What’s he doing taking charge like this, anyway? You rank him!”

Sophronia, still backing away, made a deep—almost courtly—bow.

Felix said, “Never doubt Mr. Temminnick’s word on the matter of immediate actions. Father, if you would be so kind, I think I ought to move

off the rails now?”

The train kept on coming.

The duke said a rude word and bent to part lift, part drag his son up the berm on the side of the tracks.

Sophronia, Dimity, and Sidheag moved to the other side, staying as close as safety might allow.

Shaggy shot his gun at the oncoming locomotive in a futile effort at stopping it. Then he and his companion raced for the airship.

The locomotive charged forward. The girls spaced themselves and braced to leap.

The engine was in front of them, and then the cab.

Dimity went first, grabbing the jamb of the open doorway on the driver’s side and swinging herself in behind Soap.

Sidheag swung in right after. Sophronia barely made it, stumbling on her dismount. Falling forward, she crashed against Soap. She barked her chin on his shoulder, causing them both pain, but quickly tried to extract herself. Soap, having reflexively embraced her with one arm, refused to let go, as though reassuring himself that she was safely back with him. He wasn’t even looking at her, his other arm and his attention focused on the work of crashing a train. Sophronia allowed the embrace; she was relieved, too. She even enjoyed that for the briefest of moments she could examine his adorable, familiar face, absorb his warm, firm presence, without fear of romantic repercussions.

He said, letting her go gently, still without looking away from the various levers, dials, and gauges, “Welcome back. Did I interpret Bumbersnoot’s message correctly, Sophronia, or do I owe our fine friends here an apology?”

“No apology necessary.” Sophronia rubbed her chin.

“So you say, but you’re not about to hit their dirigible with a ruddy great train.” Soap donned a slightly maniacal grin.

Sophronia stuck her head out, took a look, and shared his glee.

Dimity ran to the other side of the cab to look out, around Monique. “Lord Mersey is clear!”

“More’s the pity,” muttered Soap.

“Now, now,” Sophronia reprimanded, “he was unexpectedly connected, as it turned out. His father was on board that airship. Caused some useful

confusion.”

Dimity said, “There they go! Bye-bye, gentlemen.” She waved cheerfully at Felix and his father as they flashed by.

The dirigible was directly in front of them now and struggling to lift off in time to avoid being hit.

It wasn’t going to make it; it was too slow. The train had gotten up speed faster than Sophronia thought possible. Clearly, she would have to learn more about trains.

“Brace yourselves!” yelled Soap. He didn’t bother to brake.

Sidheag said, voice wobbly, worried about the train, “Soap, you could slow down a little!” Her little pal, Dusty, was happily stoking the boiler up into the red; he didn’t even register what they were up to.

The train wasn’t going all *that* fast—a horse at full trot might have kept pace—but it still relentlessly plowed into the dirigible. Sophronia held the doorway behind Soap, leaning out just enough to watch the carnage. She was reminded of the time, what seemed like an age ago, when she had tumbled out of a dumbwaiter and landed in a trifle.

The dirigible was designed to float easily and with minimal effort, not to withstand a train-sized battering ram. The gondola was only made of thin wood, and splintered around the locomotive much as the custard and strawberries had once done over Mrs. Barnaclegoose’s favorite bonnet.

They thrust easily through the one-room interior of the dirigible, leaving bits of propeller, small steam engine parts, and wood scraps scattered behind. The train didn’t even try to derail.

The balloon section, suddenly free of a deal of weight, bobbed upward, swaying wildly from side to side.

Dimity gasped. “Would you look at that?”

Like some strange form of fruit from a floating trifle, the heart of the flywaymen’s dirigible spilled forth vast numbers of crystalline valve frequensors. Hundreds of them scattered everywhere. They must have been all set up, below the airship deck, in hundreds of little cradles, all linked to one big aetherographic transmitter. It explained everything, including why the airship could only boast a skeletal crew—the weight alone!

The frequensors, which were like faceted milky glass, sparkled, rolling everywhere. Some fractured into thousands of pieces, some were smashed under the wheels of the train as it completed its destructive charge and

emerged unscathed, leaving carnage in its wake. *Again*, thought Sophronia, *not unlike me and that trifle.*

The dirigible's balloon, along with the top portion of what remained of the gondola, bobbed higher. Sophronia and Dimity stuck their heads out their respective doors; Dimity, pushing Monique carelessly aside as if she were a curtain, craned to look behind. Monique was still screaming, but that might be due to the indignity of being treated like drapery.

Dimity yelled, "The duke has left Lord Mersey and is trying to collect prototypes—sorry—frequensors. Oh, dear, it's as if he's lost his marbles."

Sophronia said, "I wager the pickled duke is none too pleased and is going to demand an explanation from his son."

Sidheag looked at her, face somber. "Will Felix rat us out?"

"I begged him not to." It was the best answer Sophronia could give, because she didn't know. Would her Piston beau reveal who they were and where they came from?

Soap said, monotone, concentrating on the track in front of them, though it was clear now and not worthy of such focus, "Don't have much faith in your sweetheart, there, do you?"

Sophronia said, "I've no illusions as to my consequence. If forced to choose between me and family, I don't know if he has the backbone to go up against the duke. I hadn't the right to ask that of him. Why should he do that for me? We've no formal engagement. I tried to encourage change, but in the end a man can't be blamed for his nature."

Soap still did not turn. "Perhaps someday you will apply that same sentiment to me," he murmured.

Sophronia was startled by the idea.

The train let out a puff of smoke and Soap tooted the horn merrily. They picked up more speed on a slight decline.

Sophronia added, "Then again, he may surprise me."

Into the resulting comparative silence Monique said, "Well, that was an interesting maneuver."

Sophronia replied, "They were responsible for the mechanicals' malfunctioning. Each one of those prototypes responded to a crystalline valve installed in a nearby household mechanical. That's why so many were serviced recently."

Monique said, "Took you long enough to figure out."

“It’s going to take them a while to re-valve all mechanicals.”

“But when they do…” Monique added, darkly, “Can’t you see the disaster in front of you? Or are you still blind? Let me down, I can help.”

“Why the vampire involvement? Why you? Why your hive?” demanded Dimity.

“You are *complete imbeciles*, all of you! What do you think has been happening all this time? Since I first tried to repurpose the prototype valve almost eighteen months ago. When you two plebeians stopped me with a cheese pie. You think this has all been a lark? You think the Picklemen are interested in anyone’s welfare besides their own?”

Sophronia frowned. *What has welfare to do with it?* She wanted to step in, but it was much smarter to let Monique run her mouth. If allowed to vent poisoned steam, she might reveal everything.

Sidheag, on the other hand, was red faced and aggravated.

Sophronia caught her friend’s yellow-eyed gaze and shook her head sharply.

Sidheag glared at her, expressing ire.

Sophronia mouthed, “Let her talk.”

Sidheag sighed.

Monique continued her diatribe. Dangling from a train doorway apparently stretched the tongue as well as the shoulders. “You think this prototype was designed to speed up floating? Oh, no, that was simply a decoy use. You think it’s for point-to-point communication? Take over from the telegraph? That’s only one application. No, the Picklemen have been intending *this* all along. Put one of their little toys inside each and every mechanical in England, and you know what the Picklemen have?”

Sophronia said, without inflection, “A standing army located in every household, able to take direct commands from them at a whim.”

Monique nodded. “A power currently limited only by the need to service every single mechanical in the realm. And transmission distance. They are moving fast to solve the first problem, and they have scientists trying to improve upon the second. There are some who think if they could only get close to the aetherosphere, they could transmit to most of the country. But all they need is London. London is what matters.”

Sophronia, being a country girl, took mild offense at that but understood Monique’s point. London was, after all, the seat of power. In addition,

almost every good London family, progressive or conservative, employed mechanicals. Only the vampires and the werewolves abstained.

If she hadn't seen all those crystalline valves with her own eyes, she would have thought Monique's talk vampire propaganda. It all seemed so far-fetched. She couldn't deny the fact that the very idea that Monique had been in the right all along rubbed her the wrong way.

Sophronia turned away, uncomfortable. Bumbersnoot was sitting smugly by Soap's feet. He'd emitted the prototype and the hurlie. Sophronia retrieved both, stuffing them into pockets.

Dimity said to Monique, "And why haven't the vampires brought this to the attention of the government?"

"The potentate knows. And the dewan, of course. But what can the Shadow Council do against such a maneuver? Parliament has a daylight hold on operations, and too many MPs are affiliated with Picklemen. Cultivator-rank peons are everywhere. If we made any overt move against them, they would simply deny everything. Intent to commit a crime is not a crime. Besides which, we don't know exactly what they propose to do with the power. Any public outcry would be greeted with grave suspicion as vampire hysteria. *Those supernaturals see plots everywhere, they always do*. Secrecy was our only option, and now you've botched that up, too. What a plague you are, Sophronia!"

Sophronia said, "You started it."

Monique rolled her eyes. "You are a child."

Sophronia asked, "What's our school's position been in all this?"

"Is that your loyalty? Are you going to fight for a finishing school, Sophronia, for the rest of your career? It's not a very wealthy patron."

"I have other options." After the Pickleman revelation, Sophronia was looking favorably, once more, on Lord Akeldama. At least she knew he wasn't a Pickleman!

Monique scoffed. "You are going to have to choose sides. We all do, in the end."

Sophronia cocked her head. "Are you trying to recruit me?"

"Cut me down and I'll consider putting in a good word with Countess Nadasdy."

"Thank you for the thought, but I have a better vampire offer." Sophronia was, however, in a quandary. What was she going to do now?

Even if she told Lord Akeldama, would he put a stop to the Picklemen? The other vampires were doing a piss-poor job of it. Lord Akeldama didn't seem the type to involve himself directly, which left… well… her.

Monique, having spoken her piece, corked up.

Sidheag and Dimity joined Sophronia in a huddle close to Soap, so they could discuss without being overheard.

"Options?" said Sophronia.

Sidheag said, "You know my wishes."

"You can't flog Monique, it's not done at your age," said Dimity, presuming as to Sidheag's feelings.

Sidheag said, "No. Well, yes. A switch tickle would do her some good. But what I meant is that I want to continue on to Scotland. My pack needs me; that is the reason we started this whole thing."

Sophronia nodded. "Soap, do you think you can make it all the way there on the back tracks without danger?"

"Birmingham and Leeds areas might give us stick. But if necessary we can stash the train and continue on in a more traditional manner."

"Oh, yes, simply hide a whole train somewhere." Even Sophronia was doubtful.

Soap smiled cheekily.

Dimity said, "Monique said it's going to take the Picklemen a while to get all mechanicals installed with the crystalline valves. They must be ramping up valve production."

Sophronia nodded. "After we get her to Scotland, if we sourced the factory site, we might be able to cause a delay in manufacturing."

Dimity said, "We do need to get back to school eventually."

"Can't do anything substantial from there," objected Sophronia.

"Do we *have* to do something substantial? Is this really our problem? What does it matter if Picklemen control mechanicals?" Dimity had already been kidnapped by vampires in the interest of subverting Pickleman interests. She was tetchy on the subject and preferred to remain out of it.

Sophronia said, "Just think, Dimity, what if they controlled the soldier mechanicals in our school? Mechanicals aren't only servants, they can also be weapons. This is not something we can simply float away from and go back to studying poisoned tea. This is important."

Dimity sighed. "But we do have time?"

Sophronia walked back to Monique. “What’s your best estimate on how long until the Picklemen control a usable majority of the nation’s mechanicals, given valve production and distribution times?”

Monique glared at her.

“Tell me and I’ll let you down.”

Monique narrowed her eyes. “Six months, a year at the outside. Mine was supposed to be a covert operation tracking their activities, designed to discover just such useful information. You messed it up.”

“Covert? In a *train*?”

“They didn’t realize, until you came on board.”

“That’s debatable,” Sophronia said, but cut Monique down with her bladed fan.

The blonde girl lowered her arms slowly, wincing from the pain.

Sophronia left Monique’s wrists bound together. Dimity took up a position, watchfully close. They couldn’t let Monique get into anything. However, the girl seemed more concerned with getting her shoulders back in order and making snide remarks about Dimity’s dreadful attire.

For the rest of the afternoon, Sophronia, Soap, and Sidheag concentrated on stoking the boilers and making certain the train kept up a steady pace. There were no switches for a while, so they clipped along smoothly and in relative peace. Soon the full moon rose over the horizon and night descended.

Sophronia distracted herself from thoughts of Felix by wondering if crashing a train into the Picklemen’s operation had managed to stall their dastardly plans all that much, or was it merely a minor inconvenience? Would more mechanicals be singing “Rule, Britannia!” soon or would it be months from now?

Before they lost daylight, Sophronia spent time tinkering with Bumbersnoot. Vieve had taught her how to pop open his casing to clean and oil him properly. She hadn’t noticed any changes after retrieving him from Madame Spetuna. But there was always the possibility that when he visited her and the flywaymen, they got hold of him and installed a tiny crystalline valve. Had he a voice box, Bumbersnoot could become their “Rule, Britannia!” canary in the coal mine. Madame Spetuna had, after all, been infiltrating the Picklemen. But there was no evidence of tampering. Sophronia resolved to leave Bumbersnoot with Vieve for a proper checkup.

In fact, she had a real need to consult with Vieve on much of what they had learned, and stolen, and crashed into.

“Getting on toward supper,” said Soap, catching her attention. He looked tired, his face drawn, his eyes only mildly twinkly.

Sophronia closed Bumbersnoot, set him to nibble at a bit of coal, and stood up.

“Food is all in the back.” Only then did she realize how hungry she was.

“We should stop for the night,” said Dimity, sounding unusually decided on the matter.

Sidheag wanted to press on, but Sophronia agreed with Dimity.

“It would be best to stop. It’s full moon night, and the tracks could be crowded with private celebration trains now that the sun is down. It’s not safe. Plus, we all need rest. It should be safe; timetables list this line as vacant all night long.”

“Picklemen might catch up to us,” objected Sidheag.

“I think they have other things to worry about. If Felix holds his tongue, they might continue to disregard us as a group of vagrant boys. Might even prefer us to the drones we stole the train from.”

“Except that we killed one of their dirigibles,” Sidheag answered.

And we’re relying on Lord Mersey’s discretion. Behind Soap’s back Sophronia gestured, making a sad face. Sidheag sighed but agreed. She, too, cared about Soap, and he couldn’t keep going indefinitely. They had to rest for his sake.

They rolled into a tiny station in a town so small they couldn’t even determine its name. It was nothing more than a platform next to a switch. There was no porter. There wasn’t even a ticket box.

Nevertheless, someone was paying attention, for a young lad with a cart pulled up next to the station shortly after they arrived. He hailed Soap from the roadway.

“Aye-up, circus in town?”

Soap looked startled, the gold Dimity dress streamers having slipped his mind.

Sophronia stuck her head around him and said cheerfully, a grin plastered to her face, “Indeed it is!”

The carter looked at her suspiciously. “You don’t *seem* like a circus.”

“More a tumbling troupe, if you know the type.”

“Oh, indeed?”

Sophronia jumped down to the track and did a little somersault forward, bouncing out of it onto one knee with a flourish.

The lad did not look impressed.

Dimity came to her rescue, jumping down and then doing the same kind of tumble maneuver. She then climbed up onto Sophronia’s shoulders. It was a move they’d practiced in class, for reaching items stashed in high places, but weren’t very good at. Sophronia stumbled to hold her footing. Dimity waggled her hands around madly.

“It’s been a long day,” said Sophronia apologetically.

The carter’s eyebrows were still suspicious, but he was clearly pleased by their friendly manner. He offered up some useful information: “Hamlet probably not sized to do you any favors. Try up a few stops. There’s a market, end of this week, be a good spot for a carnival.”

“Thank you kindly!” chirruped Sophronia. “We may just do that.”

The lad doffed his hat and clicked his donkey into a lumbering walk.

Their inadvertent addition, Dusty the stoker, cleared his throat as the grumbling from the locomotive died down and the steam engine came to rest.

Sophronia looked at him, surprised into remembering that he was with them, not merely an extra feature of the stolen train.

Sidheag hadn’t forgotten him. “Is something wrong, Dusty?”

“Mr. Sid, sir, it’s only that we’re running low on coal. If you lads want to keep going, you’ll need to get fuel from somewheres, and this station’s not big enough to have reserves.”

“I’d better check the tender.” Soap disappeared behind the boiler. He came back a few minutes later, only to nod his agreement with Dusty’s assessment. Soap might be a novice train driver, but he had an excellent working knowledge of boilers and their coal consumption. He was also dragging a very dirty Bumbersnoot in his wake.

“Guess who’s eaten too much?”

Bumbersnoot was leaking steam out his carapace and steam out his ears and had a definite bloated appearance.

“Oh, Bumbersnoot, have you been eating all our reserves? Bad dog.”

Bumbersnoot’s ears sagged, guilty.

“Not a whole lot we can do about it now,” said Sidheag, protecting the

mechanimal from Sophronia's ire.

Sophronia sighed. "I hope he hasn't damaged himself." She put Bumbersnoot in a corner and tied his reticule straps to a nearby protrusion so he couldn't eat any *more* of their precious coal. He did look unwell; it was troubling. "I should probably check his insides, but he's running too hot to touch. Who'd like first watch?"

Soap said, "I'll take it. What do you suggest, a regular walkabout, plus roof and skyline? Say every quarter hour or so?"

"If you're sure you're not too tired." Sophronia really was worried about him. He looked so exhausted.

"I'd rather a solid block of sleep later."

Sophronia said, "Very well, then, I'll take second."

Sidheag agreed to third and Dimity fourth. Dusty said he'd take fifth, unfamiliar with the division of two-hour watches.

Sidheag said kindly, "There is no fifth, but you've been doing all the stoking and aren't even part of our operation. You should sleep the full night."

"We're most grateful for all your help, by the way, Mr. Dusty," added Sophronia.

"And I'll make it worth your while once we get to Scotland," said Sidheag.

Dusty looked embarrassed as everyone turned appreciative attention upon him.

"What would you like?" continued Sidheag. "Position at the castle?"

Dusty said, blushing, "Oh, now, Mr. Sid, I'm quite happy as a stoker."

"Very well, then, we will try to arrange matters so our making off with this train doesn't affect your stoking career in any detrimental manner," said Sophronia.

Dusty looked confused by the long words but disposed to be amenable.

Monique said, from the doorway where she sat hunkered under Dimity's watchful gaze, "You won't be working for a vampire-run operation ever again, that's for certain."

Dusty looked ashamed.

"Don't you worry," said Sidheag, turning her nose up at Monique, "I'll make certain the werewolves look after you."

Dusty said, "Never knew I'd end up mixed up with the supernatural

simply because I got to stoking the wrong train at the wrong time."

"Good stokers are hard to come by," said Soap, "valuable asset and don't you forget it."

Sidheag agreed with him, slapping Dusty on the shoulder, causing a puff of black dust to rise into the air.

"Thanks, lads," said Dusty, dipping his head to hide his pleasure.

After that, they let themselves down and trailed off to various coaches. Now that they had all six carriages to themselves, they considered each occupying a separate coach in a kind of private hotel scenario. But in the end, they decided it was better to stick together. While Soap sat first watch, Monique safely trussed up in the cab, Dusty and Sidheag slept in one coach with Dimity and Sophronia in the next one down. They chose the carriage closest to the locomotive so that they could hear Soap shout if anything untoward occurred. Bumbersnoot stayed in the cab, where Soap could keep an eye on him and his overindulgence.

Dimity might have protested that Sidheag should not be alone with Dusty, even if it was a first-class conveyance, but as far as they could tell, Dusty still had no idea they were girls. Should anyone hear any details of this escapade, Sidheag's reputation would be ruined, if being alone with Captain Niall hadn't already done the trick. Sophronia was eager for a moment alone with Sidheag to learn more on that particular situation, as Sidheag and the good captain seemed to have gotten close. Unfortunately, Sophronia suspected even she didn't have the necessary competence to extract information on Sidheag's finer feelings from Sidheag. The girl could be remarkably tight-lipped. Frustrating, as other people's finer feelings were fun to talk about.

After such an exciting day, Sophronia thought she would fall asleep easily, but her mind whirred like a mechanical. She stared up at the ceiling of the coach, thinking about the vampires, and Picklemen, and Felix, and Soap.

She thought Dimity was asleep already until her friend spoke into the silence. "Will Felix come back to you, do you think?"

"Oh, Dimity, he won't do, not for me. I tried to make him over but he's a dress in the wrong size no matter what I do."

"But Sophronia, he's a duke's son."

"He's a Pickleman's son." *And I regret letting him get close. Why was I*

so taken by those blue eyes? I wonder if, all along, it was Felix who thought he could change me.

"Not one for the Picklemen, then?"

"I simply feel that world domination is not my cup of tea. Is that shortsighted?"

"No. I thought you might decide against them."

"You did, why?"

"They don't feel Sophronia-ish. Something about those green-banded top hats. I mean, how silly would you look in a green-banded top hat?"

"No one said I would have to wear one. They shouldn't have started with me right from the beginning, if they hadn't tried for the prototype…"

"So are we going to work with the vampires in this? Join up with Monique?"

Sophronia shuddered. "What an unpleasant thought."

"You're not the one they kidnapped."

"Exactly! It feels equally wrong to help them."

"But we can't go up *against* everyone, either. We haven't even finished properly yet." Dimity sounded small and pathetic.

"No, but we can manipulate them to annihilate one another. I'm not sure how quite yet, but I'll think on it. There's always my *vampire friend*."

"Felix won't like it if you annihilate his father."

"I told you it wasn't going to work. Can't base a marriage on annihilation, not even when one is an intelligencer and the other a Pickleman."

"No"—Dimity was philosophical—"I suppose you can't. It's too bad. I thought you rather liked him."

It was such a simple, wistful statement, and yet, for some reason, it brought hot tears to Sophronia's normally dry eyes. "I rather *did* like him."

Dimity whispered, fully sympathetic, having had her heart broken by a Dingleproops only recently, "Did you write him poetry?"

"No, luckily, I did not."

"Well, then, less to recover from."

"Good point."

"Don't worry, we will find you someone." Dimity was ever the optimist. "Possibly not as handsome."

Sophronia said, to lighten the mood, "I wonder if Monique has a

brother?”

“Oh, really, Sophronia. Be serious. You must have something you *want* in a beau?”

Sophronia thought of Felix’s blue eyes and lazy ways. And then of Soap’s dark, cheerful gaze and jocularity. She thought that she wanted Soap’s gentle personality and Felix’s focused attention. She wanted Felix’s breezy, relaxed approach to high society and Soap’s easy infiltration of the lower orders. She wanted humor, and kind hands, and sweet smiles, and genuine longing looks. She wanted that expression she had caught between Captain Niall and Sidheag. She wanted trust. *I’m going to spend most of my life pretending to be other people, hiding and skulking in shadows. I want someone who will remind me of who I am. Once I’ve figured that out.*

What she said was “I want a man who stays out of my way.”

“Oh my, well then,” said Dimity with utter confidence, “you should marry my brother. You are still engaged, I believe.”

That caused both of them to laugh uproariously. The very idea of Pillover marrying anyone, let alone Sophronia! It took them a while to calm sufficiently to sleep after that. They would keep giggling. Things were always funnier when one was lying down.

Dirigibles Versus Trains

Soap was a silent figure sitting in the doorway of the cab as Sophronia approached, two hours later. He was smoking his awful cob pipe and staring into the moonlit night.

"My turn," she said. "How's everything been?"

"Quiet as a dry boiler." Soap knocked out his pipe; he knew she disliked the habit.

"Bumbersnoot?"

"Sleeping it off."

"Monique?" They turned to look at the blonde's slumbering form.

"That one. Why'd we not dump her from the train when we had the chance?"

"There's still time."

Soap snorted. He jumped down from the cab. The crunch of his landing on the railway stones was awfully loud.

"Beautiful moon," he said as it appeared from between rain clouds. "Don't see much of it down in engineering on the airship."

"Hope any local werewolves are locked away." Sophronia was thinking of Captain Niall and the dewan. Where were the two werewolves holed up while they battled moon-madness? She fervently hoped it was secure and silver coated. She'd encountered Captain Niall moon-mad once, and lost her best petticoat to salivating jaws. The dewan was stronger, bigger, and angrier; she could only imagine what he'd be like. More would be lost than undergarments.

“Must be tough, being a werewolf. Never to see full moon.”

“Better than being a vampire, never to see the sun, miss,” replied the sootie, his tone a warning.

Sophronia then did something quite daring. She wasn’t sure why. Perhaps she was emboldened by the quiet stillness. Perhaps it was the freedom inherent in her masculine garb. But she shifted close to Soap, side by side and companionable, staring at the moon. She was terribly tempted to put her head on his shoulder. It was exactly the correct height.

“So long as you are doing it for all the right reasons, I can’t talk you out of it,” she said, realizing she could no more change Soap’s desires than she could Felix’s allegiance.

“But you aren’t going to help me make it happen, are you, miss?”

“No, I’m not.” Sophronia’s face burned and she knew he was looking at her. In the silvery light her blush wouldn’t show, thank heavens. She wanted to run from the inevitable conversation, from any confession of forbidden affection, from the mere possibility that she might have to break Soap’s heart.

“You don’t agree with Miss Sidheag, yet you are helping her.”

He had a point, so Sophronia held her tongue. She couldn’t articulate why she felt differently about Soap, more proprietary. But she did.

“You could talk me out of it, Sophronia.” He said her name carefully, cautiously, experimenting with the sound of it on his tongue. She was always “miss” to him. She was always his superior. Was he practicing for a future when they might be equals? Without werewolf status he’d never be able to call her that, not in public, not in the social world she was training to inhabit, not even as friends.

Which was why she couldn’t talk him out of it, not really. Sophronia wasn’t going to make promises she couldn’t keep, not to Soap.

She replied using his real name, saying only, “Perhaps I could, Phineas. But it’s not my place to do so. Any more than with Sidheag. You have as much a right as she to your own choices, even if I think you both foolish.”

She hoisted herself into the cab of the train without looking at him, remembering how warm and gentle his lips were against her own, and how the muscles in his arms felt wrapped about her. *I’m fickle*, she thought. *And I don’t deserve to be tinkering with anyone’s heart.*

Soap’s hand caught her ankle. “I want to be worthy.”

She could hardly believe he would dare touch her, on the leg! But she kind of liked it. So she crouched and covered his hand with hers. “You already are, Soap.”

“Not in the eyes of the world.” His hand was as soft on the back as it was callused on the palm.

“And this is your best solution?”

“No. This is my only solution.”

Soap went to bed.

Sophronia’s heart hurt and she had no idea why. She sat looking out the cab windows, first one side, then the other. It was excessively dull. Lady Linette had warned them of this. “Try not to think it glamorous, ladies. Intelligencer work is nine-tenths discontented ennui, and one-tenth abject terror. Rather like falling in love.” *So far*, thought Sophronia, *love has been more a series of crushing discomforts. Perhaps I’m going about it the wrong way?*

Monique shifted once or twice. She must be cold, for the cab was open to the night, and though the rain still wasn’t in earnest it had settled into a consistent drizzle. Sophronia checked Monique’s bonds, and the place where Dimity had lashed them to the train. *All secure.*

Sophronia wasn’t so foolish as to think her enemy asleep. Still, when Monique spoke, it startled her.

“You’re a queer one, Sophronia. You had Lord Mersey on your string and let him go. Regardless of his political connection, that marriage could have been lucrative. And imagine, if you managed to turn him, you would have gone down in the record books as one of the best Mademoiselle Geraldine ever produced.”

“And lose the love of my husband by driving away his family?”

Monique scoffed. “Love, what has love to do with any of this? If you’re throwing over a peer in favor of that simpering, soot-covered savage, you’re more puerile than even I realized.”

Sophronia went hot about the ears. No one spoke about Soap that way, especially not Monique! Her temper got the better of her.

“How dare you say such a thing. You’re not even fit to lick his boots!” Sophronia hissed, afraid of waking the others.

“Boots! He’s too poor to have any. That boy wouldn’t know how to clean boots, let alone wear them. You’re barely class yourself, Sophronia.

Who are your parents, after all? You can't afford to marry down, and *no one* can afford to marry a sootie!"

This made Sophronia all the more upset, because it was true. Had she been rejecting Soap all along not because he was ruining their friendship but because of his station in life? "Clap your trap shut, Monique, or I'll fill it with something disagreeable." She lashed out, angrier with herself than Monique, but taking it out on her regardless.

Monique snorted. "I'm only offering you a bit of helpful advice."

"Because we both know you've got my best interests at heart? You're nothing more than a failure, Monique. You couldn't finish properly, so you ride the coattails of a vampire hive because no decent family would take you for their son."

Now it was Monique's turn to gasp in outrage. "I *wanted* to become a drone! I'll have a chance at immortality. What are you going to do the rest of your life? Cozy up with a sootie and pop out half-breed babies to muck in the coal dust like their father?"

Sophronia considered all the various ways she had learned to kill someone. She catalogued them in her brain and spent a satisfying few moments applying each to Monique in order. Then she concentrated on her breathing, attempting to stopper up her anger and regain control of the situation. Then she stood and, casually, tore another strip off her much-abused shirt and gagged Monique with it. Tightly. Monique drooled a bit around the edges of the rag, which was satisfying to see.

The rest of the night was blissfully uneventful, outwardly at least. Sophronia was troubled by her own feelings of guilt. She was traumatized by the realization that she had never given Soap a fair chance because she was afraid of his lowly position. She tortured herself with imagining what-ifs. What if Soap were not a sootie? What if Soap were the same class or race? Would she have closed herself off to his feelings so brutally? Had she been cruel as well as snobbish? The speculation kept her wide eyed and staring out into the night the whole rest of her watch.

Everyone was awake at dawn. There was a sense of nervous urgency that drew them, uncomplaining, into the cab. They stoked the boiler, started the engine up, and got the train moving northward with silent efficiency. No one commented on Monique's gag.

Sophronia felt awkward and uncomfortable around Soap. More aware of

the way he stood, the set of his shoulders, the nuances of his expression. She tried to monitor her own reactions, to be friendly but not too friendly. She tried not to think about his affection for her, or their future apart.

They chugged along at a slow but steady pace. They learned more about the switches and how to operate them, neatly avoiding several collisions. They were getting cocky about the whole proceeding. They were also running dangerously low on coal, not to mention food.

They stopped for lunch, ate the last of their reserves, and had to un-gag Monique to feed her. Which meant they had to listen to her. Which meant they had to gag her again right quick.

“She’s only a drone,” sneered Sidheag. “And she lost the operation, so Countess Nadasdy will not be happy with her. I say we dispose of her.”

“She is trained. If we let her go, she’s not without resources,” cautioned Dimity.

“She’s a rotten egg waiting to explode,” said Sophronia.

Soap said, “I’d rather we don’t actually kill her, I’d as soon not go down for murder.”

Dusty only looked embarrassed by the whole conversation.

In the end, they elected to push Monique out the door as the train crossed a small bridge over a goose pond. The water looked particularly dirty. Soap slowed the train while Dimity untied Monique’s wrists. The girl made a delightful squawking noise around the gag as she fell. She also made a decidedly satisfying splash. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be another train along for ages.

With Monique gone the mood lifted. They began to plan how to acquire more coal and food.

Then Dimity gave a holler. She’d spent most of the afternoon hanging by one arm out the doorway, while Sophronia took the same position behind Soap. This left room in the middle for Sidheag and Dusty to stoke.

Dimity explained her holler. “I see a dirigible on the horizon.”

“Flywaymen?”

“Hard to tell, they’re far off.”

Sophronia came over, shading her eyes. “I don’t *think* it’s the one we crashed into, how could they repair it that fast? Besides, this one looks armored.”

“Wonderful, does it have a cannon mount and recoil guard?” Sidheag

asked.

“Looks like.”

“I guess the Picklemen decided we know too much,” said Dimity. *Rather calm*, Sophronia thought proudly, *under the circumstances*.

“Or your darling Lord Mersey ratted us out,” said Sidheag.

“Not my darling anything, Sidheag.” Sophronia was abruptly tired of that game. And she didn’t like the way Soap’s shoulders hunched at Sidheag’s words.

“If they know we’re Mademoiselle Geraldine’s girls and not Bunson’s boys…” Sidheag stressed her point. Bunson’s boys on the loose larking up to Scotland were one thing. Bunson’s boys were dangerous with exotic inventions but could be depended upon to come ’round to the Pickleman agenda eventually. Mademoiselle Geraldine’s girls, on the other hand, were dangerous with information and couldn’t be depended upon by anyone but their patrons.

That was the moment when Sophronia realized their safest course of action would have been to return to school. The Picklemen would never make a direct move against Mademoiselle Geraldine’s, for that would only get intelligencers investigating. Plus, they couldn’t afford to make an outright enemy of Lady Linette.

The dirigible following them had a propeller spinning at high speed. It had also caught a stiff breeze and was gaining on them.

Nevertheless, a train was faster than most dirigibles, except those new high-flyers out of France. They could tell even at a distance that this was an older model, of the kind Queen Victoria once employed in the Royal Float Force, heavy and heavily armed.

They had only one choice.

“I guess we try to outrun it,” said Soap. “All hands to the boilers!”

By this point in the journey, most of the girls had given Dusty a hand with the boilers, breaking whenever he needed a rest. As a result, they had all developed some rudimentary shoveling savvy. They also had arms screaming from the unexpected activity. Sophronia had thought, before this journey, that she was rather fit. She was, after all, prone to climbing around airships and swinging from hurlies. But stoking was a whole different beast. It was awfully hard work, and explained Soap’s delightful muscles. There were only two shovels on the train, so they took turns going as fast as they

could, working their way through what coal was left in the tender at an alarming rate. One girl, inside the tender, scooped it forward into range, then the stoker shoved it as fast as possible into the boiler.

The train screamed at the top of its pitch, engine taxed almost beyond capacity.

“Any more and we won’t make those turns,” Dusty cautioned Soap, who nodded his agreement.

The girls kept shoveling.

“We don’t want to blow her, and we don’t want to lose the rails!” yelled Soap.

So they had to relax their efforts, even though Dimity reported that the dirigible, while not gaining on them, was keeping pace.

It was a challenging afternoon. Mademoiselle Geraldine’s prepared its young ladies for unusual situations, but it did not prepare them for heavy labor. The very *idea*! Even as intelligencers, actually *working* was not expected of women of standing. Now that Sophronia, Dimity, and Sidheag were acting drudges, they didn’t even have time to stop for tea. Not that there was any tea.

As the sun began to set and the moon rose, now on the waning side of full, they realized the tender was empty.

It wasn’t a surprise, they knew it was coming, but now they had to face reality.

They fed the boiler more slowly, eking out the last of the reserves that Bumbersnoot hadn’t consumed, drawing out the inevitable.

“The flywaymen are gaining on us,” reported Dimity.

An hour or so later, “They’re on our tail now.”

Half an hour after that, “Cannons are up.”

And then, “Can’t see them anymore, they must be right on top of us.”

A boom sounded.

“They’re firing!” said Dimity.

“Yes, dear. We can hear that,” said Sophronia.

Nothing happened; the train continued to clatter along. The cannonball must have missed. There was a long pause while the dirigible reloaded. Soap gave the engine all the throttle they had, but the boiler was cooling regardless.

Another boom sounded.

This time Dimity didn’t report the occurrence. But the train did shake dramatically. It shuddered and then began to squeal as if the brake were being applied.

Soap said, “We’re dragging something against the line. One of the back carriages might be off the tracks. It could derail the rest of us if we aren’t careful.” He let the train slow further.

Sophronia said, “We’ll have to decouple them. Only solution. Should have thought of it sooner; dragging less weight, we would have used less coal.”

“Too late now,” said Soap.

“Never!” said Sophronia, readying her hurlie.

“You can’t go out there,” objected Dimity. “They’re shooting cannons at us!”

“One cannon, and it takes them time to reload, not to mention recover the height of the airship and reseat the recoil guard. I have ten minutes.” Before she’d finished her explanation, Sophronia leapt and grabbed the top of the doorjamb, swinging to climb up onto the cab roof. She might have been more graceful had they not been moving fast. As it was, she bumped her shin.

“Sophronia,” reprimanded Dimity at the top of her voice, “you’re too impetuous. You’ll get yourself killed!”

It was a lot easier to run along the top of the carriages and jump from one to the next when she was moving in the opposite direction to the train. As soon as she’d crossed the freight carriages, she saw the problem. The second-to-last carriage, the one in front of the coach that held the airdinghy, had detached partly from the transmitter’s carriage. The airdinghy was tilted oddly, because half of the coach below had been blown away.

Sophronia crouched on the roof of the transmitter to evaluate the situation. Then, trying not to worry over the danger, she hooked the grapple part of her hurlie into the top edge of the freight carriage and lowered herself down the side. Partly standing on the coupler base, and partly dangling from one arm, she examined the coupler at her feet. Bent double, she was grateful she’d chosen to leave off her stays.

One of the holding pegs had fallen out, and its broken chain was dragging on the track. The coupler was linked only halfway as a result. The drag on the line that Soap had described must be coming from farther back,

probably that last coach.

Sophronia worked to free the second peg, to lose the dead weight of those last two passenger carriages. It was wedged tight as a new glove. It didn't help that she had only one hand to apply to the task, her other being occupied holding her steady, dangling from the hurlie. She also had no way to brace herself. She banged at the peg with the heel of her hand. Nothing.

She pulled out a vial of perfume oil and tried adding that, to grease it loose.

Still nothing, and now her hand was slippery.

She swung about and kicked at the peg hard. All that seemed to do was bruise her foot. Her various weapons weren't going to work. She needed brute force and she hadn't anything about her person.

It wasn't in her nature to give up. She climbed up the freight carriage and ran as quickly as she could back along the top of the train.

Time had run out.

Behind her came cannon fire. She flattened herself to the top of the carriage.

The train shook and she heard the ghastly noise of metal and wood rending asunder. The train slowed to a crawl.

Sophronia looked behind and saw that the last carriage was now a mess of wood and plush interiors dragging behind. Their poor little airdinghy, which had served them so well and proudly, was part of the wreckage.

Queen Victoria's old military floaters were able to take the weight of only four cannonballs. It was one of the reasons they'd been discontinued. That meant the flywaymen behind them only had one more shot.

Sophronia had just enough time while they reloaded to do what needed to be done.

She jumped to her feet and dashed on, ending on the roof of the cab.

She stuck her head down over the edge into the engine room.

"Soap, I need you!"

"I'm a little busy right now, miss."

"Miss?" said Dusty, confused by the gender switch.

"I'll explain later," reassured Sidheag.

"Let Sidheag drive," said Sophronia to Soap.

"I'm helping Dusty!" protested Sidheag.

"Then let Dimity drive. This will only take a moment."

Dimity’s face went owl-like in awe at her new responsibility. Nevertheless, she gamely stepped forward. Soap reluctantly relinquished his position.

“Just keep this gauge here at that mark, see? And this one between those two lines? Got it, miss?”

“I think so, Mr. Soap.”

“Another *miss*?” objected Dusty.

“You can’t tell me that one surprises you?” protested Sidheag.

“Are you a *miss*, too?” Dusty was still gamely shoveling.

But Soap had swung himself out and climbed up on the roof next to Sophronia. They had other things to repair than Dusty’s sensibilities.

“This better be important, miss.”

“Come on! They only have one more shot.”

“How you figure that?”

“With airships, weight is weight, they can’t have redesigned it that much. That’s an old model. It can only carry as much as it did in the old days.”

“If you say so.”

Sophronia was already running, crouched low, along the roofs of the carriages back toward the problem coupler. Soap followed gamely. They reached the edge of the freight carriage unscathed. Soap was not quite so sure-footed as Sophronia, but then she was beginning to feel that this was her native environment, running over the roofs of a moving train.

She pointed to the problem below. “There, can you work that last peg loose?”

Soap hung over the edge. “I’ll do my best.”

Sophronia handed him the hurlie and he lowered himself down.

He dropped farther than she had, bracing one foot precariously against each of the tiny bars at the ends of the carriages, straddling the coupler. It was a good thing they were moving slowly. He wrapped both hands about the peg and tried to shift it, twisting back and forth, tugging. The muscles of his back and shoulders strained. It was a dangerous position. If he was successful and the back carriage separated, he would fall off the end.

The peg wouldn’t budge, so he shifted to bang at it with his feet, just as Sophronia had done. Then he grabbed and wiggled it.

Cannon fire sounded. Sophronia, crouching on top, flattened herself to

the roof once more.

Soap returned to pulling just as a massive jolt hit the train, jerking the coupler.

He tugged, everything jumped, and the peg worked free all at once. Now lacking the safety peg, and with the back carriages dragging against the tracks, the train decoupled. The front part of the train drew away.

Soap was forced into an uncomfortable contortion. He shifted his weight and pinwheeled forward, into the emptiness where the train had been. Sophronia lurched for the hurlie rope, grabbing on to it just in time. Her arms wrenched and she almost slid over the side, for Soap was no lightweight. She gritted her teeth and braced her chest against the transmitter edge. Front padding had some uses but it wasn't comfortable.

Soap swung and slammed against the back of the freight carriage. But they weren't dragging him along the track, which was something. Sophronia strained, holding him up by pure force of will, for he really was too heavy for her.

Soap was a dead weight. Sophronia's arms began to shake and she wasn't going to be able to hold him for long.

Then his head lifted and he twisted, scrambling for some kind of purchase on the train. His feet found the remaining half of the coupler. With Sophronia's added weight on the hurlie, he managed to stand, leaning against the back of the freight carriage.

"Soap! Soap, are you hurt?" Sophronia's voice sounded overly breathless and winded to her own ears.

"Just stunned and a little bruised, miss. Don't you worry about me."

"If you're able, can I let go the hurlie? Then you can crank it in yourself?"

"Ready, miss."

Sophronia let go. Soap managed to pull in on the hurlie rope so it was once more taut to the grapple over the top rail. He used the tension to climb up to the roof.

Sophronia pounced upon him. She was not so brave as to hug him, but her hands were quick to stroke over his head, checking for injury. He'd lost his cap, and the texture of his tight, curly hair was reassuring. She could feel no stickiness of blood, although he would have a bumper of an egg on the back left side.

“How do you feel? Are you dizzy? Did you rattle your brain?” She could not stop petting him.

Soap submitted meekly to her ministrations. “I’m fine, miss. Not much brain to rattle. You know me, same color and toughness as old boot leather.”

Sophronia sighed and forced herself to stop touching him.

He caught one of her hands as she lowered them.

“Though I do like your concern, miss.” He was looking at her with those serious dark eyes. The ones that switched twinkle for intent.

The horror of almost losing him curdled her stomach and she felt quite ill. Sophronia also wished she could see into his eyes clearly, check the state of his pupils. Sister Mattie had warned them about derangement of the brain due to physical force.

The train gave a start, as though sensing its newfound freedom, and picked up speed.

Sophronia braced Soap solicitously.

He let her, because he knew she needed it.

The moment Sophronia realized this, she knew she was in trouble. Because it had always been that way between her and Soap. And it *was* more than friendship. And she was an idiot not to have realized it sooner. What was it she had told Dimity? *I want a man who stays out of my way*. Soap wouldn’t ever get in her way.

“Miss, are you well?”

“Soap, I…”

They heard a shouting above them and looked up to see the underside of the flywaymen’s dirigible, managing to keep pace.

Several men were leaning over the edge, their faces pale in the dim light of evening. One of those faces was Felix’s and another was that of his father.

The Duke of Golborne was pointing a very wicked-looking pistol at them.

“You know what,” said Sophronia to Soap, “I think I have rather decided to hate guns.”

“Interesting decision in your line of work,” replied Soap conversationally, letting her go and slowly turning to face this new threat.

The duke yelled down, “Stay where you are, young lady!”

So Felix has told him who I am. Or what I am, at the very least.

Sophronia ignored the duke and stared at her erstwhile beau. Felix Mersey had the grace to look ashamed. Sophronia ought to have felt betrayed, but mostly she simply felt disappointed.

Sophronia yelled up at the duke, “I can’t very well obey you, sir, even if I wanted to. In case it has slipped your notice, I’m not the one driving this train.”

“Oh, I noticed. And here’s what we are going to do about it. You leave the darkie here and I’ll keep a careful eye on him while you go order the driver to stop. If you manage that in the space of ten minutes, then you will return to find him still alive. How’s that for a fair bargain?”

He gestured casually with the pistol as he talked.

Soap said, calm and mild-mannered, “I take your point about guns, miss.”

Sophronia said up to the airship, “I’m disappointed, Your Grace. I thought you hired others to do your dirty work.”

The duke was not to be distracted by taunting. “Sometimes if you want something done properly, you had best organize it yourself. You can’t distract me, young lady; my son here has told me all about your wiles and ways. I fail to see the appeal, but he assures me of your many stealthy means of attraction. I’ve loosed your coils about him and I assure you they will have no effect on me.”

Sophronia was slightly revolted at the idea that she would use any wiles whatsoever on someone the duke’s age. She was also angry that Felix had attributed their nascent romance to her training. Although, of course, he might be blaming her to get out of trouble with his father. But she was also a little flattered that the duke thought she was that good.

Nevertheless, there was a gun to think about. It was now pointing, despite the dirigible bobbing and the train swaying, with a remarkably steady hand, directly at Soap’s chest.

Sophronia looked into Soap’s face. “I’ll be quick as I can.”

He whispered, unheard by the men floating above them, “Just make a break for it, miss. Now that we dropped the dead weight, I’m certain the train can outrun them with the last of the coal. I’ll be fine.”

Sophronia looked over his shoulder, out into the countryside rushing past, stalling for time. She caught sight of *something* moving at speed across the open fields toward them. Probably attracted by the cannon fire.

Two somethings.

One of which had a top hat tied to his furry, lupine head.

“Now, Miss Temminnick!” insisted the duke, pistol cocked. *So he knows my name as well as my gender. Fantastic.*

Sophronia leaned in to Soap, who still wore the hurlie, which was still hooked to the top railing of the freight carriage.

She fell against him as though to embrace him good-bye in an excess of emotion. “They only have one ship,” she whispered into his ear.

Soap was confused but willing to participate even under the threat of an anxious gun. “Yes, miss.”

“And there are four of us, four people who know too much.”

“Yes, miss.”

“If we separate, they can’t chase all of us.”

“Ah,” said Soap, following her reasoning, testing the tension in the hurlie. “Yes, I see.”

Soap understood her. Soap would always understand.

Dewan Ex Machina

Soap was still shaky from his head bang, but he was stronger than Sophronia, and they hadn't time to switch anyway. Thus, for purely practical reasons, he had to hold the hurlie.

Sophronia turned to say to the duke, lips trembling with simulated emotions, "I'll do anything you say, Your Grace, only please don't hurt him."

The duke looked utterly disgusted by this. Whether it was the idea that he would waste a bullet on a sootie, or the idea that Sophronia might harbor real feelings for an underling, it was difficult to tell which.

Then Sophronia threw herself at Soap, wrapping her arms and legs about him in the apparent throes of some passionate fit. It was the final embrace of lovers about to be parted forever, worthy of Romeo and Juliet.

In the same movement, like a dance, Soap sank them to their knees. Then he leaned backward and with a shift of weight slid them both off the side of the moving train.

Though the hurlie did enough to slow their fall, it played out too swiftly, and the train had picked up enough speed that they tumbled hard to the track below. The moment they hit the ground Sophronia had out her bladed fan and cut them free of the hurlie. Soap curled himself protectively about her, because he was prone to being stupidly careful with her welfare, so that he took most of the fall—*and that on top of his crash earlier.*

They ended with Sophronia sprawled indelicately on top of him. She unwound herself, heart beating double, because Soap was lying so very

still.

“Soap! Soap?”

“Just give me a moment, miss, gathering my wits back about me. Not every day a lad intentionally throws himself from a train. Not every day I get you on top of me, neither, could be the shock of both at once.”

Sophronia ran her hands over him for the second time in so many minutes, checking for injuries. Not that she was a trained surgeon, to know when a bone was out, but she could at least determine if he had any open wounds.

He shifted uncomfortably under her touch. “Whoa there, miss,” he almost squeaked, “that’s enough of that!”

“Oh, dear me, are you hurt? Have I hurt you more?” She’d never forgive herself if she damaged him further.

“I think most of me’s fine, miss. Just, please, leave off the touching.”

“I do apologize.” Sophronia was mortified. Of course, Soap’s dignity! He’d hardly want her pawing at him. “I was only checking.”

“Whoa, now. Not that I didn’t like it, miss. You can check me much as you like, only later. I think right now we needs must focus on those friendly fellows. They’ve chosen to stay with us and let the train go.”

Sophronia rolled off Soap and onto her back, looking into the sky.

The flywaymen and their military dirigible were sinking down to the berm at the side of the track.

The train was out of sight—Sidheag, Dimity, Dusty, and Bumbersnoot with it.

Sophronia stood and brushed herself off.

Soap unfolded himself slowly. He was shaken by the fall, bruised and scraped quite a bit.

At her solicitous look, he said, “I think it’s all working, but miss, knowing you sure isn’t kind to a body.” He turned to the open field, clearly thinking about the duke and his gun. “Should we make a run for it?”

“Ah,” said Sophronia, “I believe we have reinforcements.”

So it proved to be, for, as the duke disembarked from his new dirigible, two werewolves came dashing up.

Sophronia stood and, dragging a reluctant Soap behind her, went to join this new gathering.

The werewolves chose to face the flywaymen and the duke, rather than

the girl and the sootie. Probably wise.

While Sophronia and Soap walked toward them, the wolves, disregarding all sense of propriety, shifted form right there, in front of the whole dirigible crew in the middle of an open field. They had their backs to Sophronia, but she nevertheless took in the sight with no little embarrassment.

Soap said, “I do believe they think you are a lad.”

“Or this is too important to care about my moral standing.”

The dewan was speaking as they ambled closer.

“… and firing on a train, Your Grace! I mean to say, this can’t be authorized by the queen, I should have known about it. And you know you can’t use cannon fire in a private matter on home soil. What were you thinking? The entire countryside reverberated with the sound. People will think we are at war!”

Duke Golborne said, “My dear dewan, there is no one around to hear. Had I known you were running nearby, I might have employed a quieter projectile. Only creatures with such well-developed hearing as yourselves would know to come investigate. I assure you, I was being quite circumspect.”

He had not, of course, answered the dewan’s accusations.

“What on earth possessed you?” the dewan demanded.

“It was necessary. That train was carrying something valuable of mine. I wished it returned.”

“And may I ask what?”

“You may *ask*, of course.”

Sophronia and Soap pitched up.

“Good evening, my lords, Your Grace,” said Sophronia.

All eyes turned to her. It was uncomfortable. Sophronia was suited to life as an intelligencer because the one thing she really didn’t like was everyone’s attention on her. That, plus full-frontal werewolf, was challenging even for a girl of her acumen.

Captain Niall, standing a little to one side of the dewan, but equally unclothed, swore softly and said, “Miss Temminnick, what on earth?” He grabbed the top hat from his head and held it to cover his privates, mortified that a student should see him in such a state.

The dewan had no such scruples. Even knowing this odd-looking young

lad was a girl did not deter him from his annoyance at the whole situation. He was not a man who tolerated being waylaid on a trip.

He frowned at Sophronia. “You again! We are due up north now, and yet you, young lady, seem bent on interfering with everything. What is it this time?”

Sophronia debated how much information to reveal and to what end. Her primary goal still had to be getting Sidheag home, and then getting herself and her companions safely back to Mademoiselle Geraldine’s and out of Pickleman clutches. Best, she thought, to throw herself on his mercy.

“Oh, my lord,” she said, eyelashes fluttering, “I am so grateful you have come! What would we have done without you? This duke has been so wicked. First he tried to steal this train, so we had to keep it away from him, and then he fired his big gun at us. It was very scary.”

“Oh, yes? And why do you think he wants the train?” The dewan was only partly taken in.

“I believe it has something that belongs to the vampires.”

“Oh ho, does it indeed? You mean besides those gold streamers? And which vampires would that be?”

“Westminster Hive.”

“And you can prove it how?”

Curses, we shouldn’t have pushed Monique overboard. “Oh, well, we accidentally tossed the evidence. But I can assure you it *does not* belong to this man.” Sophronia gave the dewan her steady gaze of pure honesty.

The duke said, “This is preposterous. You can’t possibly take her word against mine!”

“Can’t I?”

“It hardly matters, the train is gone now,” pointed out Captain Niall.

“True, but we could catch it easily enough,” answered the dewan, speaking of their supernatural speed.

Sophronia brightened. “Oh, could you? Good. Lady Kingair is on board.”

“What!” Neither the dewan nor Captain Niall was pleased to hear that.

Sophronia said, “Why do you think we snuck on in the first place? The train was headed north and she wanted to go home. I know she isn’t furry, my lord, but she considers herself a werewolf. That’s her family you’re going up to reprimand, and she wants to be with them. You can’t blame us

for trying to get her there."

Captain Niall recovered from his embarrassment and actually chuckled at that statement. "I did warn you, sir. They aren't ordinary girls. Unless you lock Lady Kingair up, she'll keep trying."

The dewan looked inquiringly at Sophronia.

Sophronia nodded. "And we'll keep helping her."

"Why?" demanded the dewan.

"Because she's our friend."

The dewan was frustrated with the whole mess. He looked at Soap. "And what have you to do with any of this?"

"Oh," mumbled Soap, embarrassed under the direct glare of such a rich and powerful man, "I'm only a sootie."

Sophronia said, stalwart, "Who else do you suggest we get to drive the train?"

"This is all quite ridiculous!" stated the duke. "They're feckless mischief-makers. You must see that."

Captain Niall, although much lower in rank, took offense at that accusation. "Your Grace, Mademoiselle Geraldine might train her girls to no good, but mischief for mischief's sake is strictly forbidden. They are not evil geniuses, after all, that's Bunson's sphere."

The dewan looked back and forth between Sophronia and the duke. "I am tempted to agree with the captain. These two have a satisfactory explanation as to why they are involved with a train. On the other hand, if there was something valuable of yours on that train, Your Grace, why were you firing a cannon at it? Your explanation seems a little wanting. Either you want the train destroyed because of what it contains, or you are after these two. And since you let the train go and stayed with these scamps, I must suppose it is them. Why?"

Because I know too much, thought Sophronia.

The duke still had his gun and was staring hard at Sophronia. She had not revealed his plot to the werewolves. She had mentioned nothing about mechanicals or crystalline valves. She had held her peace regarding his evil plans, whatever those plans were. Did he trust her to keep them hidden? Or did he realize that she was not talking because the whole thing sounded preposterous? She was trained to know that the best explanation was always the simplest. They both knew that the childish whims of a group of girls,

worried about their unhappy friend, made a plausible excuse. A countrywide Pickleman plot for mechanical uprising did not.

But what could the duke say to counter her, without revealing that plot himself?

Sophronia was betting on the duke's not being as quick as she.

The duke glared. "My boy should have warned me about you sooner."

Captain Niall said, "Now, now, Your Grace, Miss Temminnick is a little precocious. There's no cause to insult the lady."

"Lady?" snorted the duke.

There was a scuffle from behind him, on board the dirigible. It looked as if Felix was taking some exception to his father's tone. But Felix had a bullet wound to the leg, and several large flywaymen appeared to be dragging him back from the railing. Obviously, they had been instructed not to let him join the conversation.

"Unhand me, you brutes!" he yelled, batting at grasping hands. And then, "Sophronia! Sophronia, there are more—" He was cut off by a massive hand.

In the interim, the duke decided on a new tactic. "Please excuse my son, he is overwrought. Well, my dear dewan, if you remand the young lady here into my custody, I will see that she gets safely back to school. I'm heading in that direction myself, I must take my boy back to Bunson's, after all."

The dewan looked as if he might jump on this plan, just to relieve himself of the responsibility of determining what was going on. A matter that, no doubt, seemed petty when compared with an entire Scottish werewolf pack running amok without an Alpha.

Captain Niall, however, was still thinking like Sophronia's teacher. "I don't know, Your Grace. You did fire a cannon at her."

"At her train," corrected the duke.

"So you acknowledge it was *her* train?" said Soap.

Everyone stared at him as if they had forgotten he existed, which they probably had.

"Who cares for your opinion, sootie?" demanded the duke.

The discussion might have gone on for a good long while, except that behind them came a deal of hollering and yelling, and over a small hill marched Sidheag, Dimity, and Bumbersnoot, armed with coal shovels and determined to come to the rescue.

Sophronia said to Soap, “They probably ran out of fuel just the other side, then found us gone. They should have stayed out of this.”

Soap said, stalwart friend to the end, “They didn’t know what we were up to—taking the tumble intentionally. They’re only doing what you would do in their position.”

Sophronia nodded. “True.”

The dewan said, “Is that Lady Kingair? Oh, good, she can help sort this out. Sensible female, for a mortal girl.”

No one had noticed, but the duke was backing toward his dirigible. A dirigible that was casting off, preparing to float away.

No one except Soap. “Uh, sirs?”

“Now!” yelled the duke, his gun swinging to point at Soap.

Only then did Sophronia realize that Duke Golborne wasn’t the only one with a gun. Perhaps Felix had been trying to warn her about that, not protect her honor.

Three of the flywaymen and the duke all shot at the assembled party.

Captain Niall, acting on supernatural teacher instinct, leapt to protect Sophronia. A bullet hit him broadside and the force of it thrust him over so that he landed fully on top of her.

The dewan moved equally fast. Disregarding the guns, which the men reloaded, he charged for the airship. It was already a few feet off the ground. It was military issue, after all, designed for this kind of maneuvering.

The duke tumbled over the edge of the gondola and back inside, displaying the fact that he favored yellow hose—*I knew there was something funny about that man!*

The dewan made a gigantic leap to grab the side of the dirigible, but even supernatural strength wasn’t enough. His grip slipped and he fell back to earth with a thud. Had he been in wolf form, he might have made it, but then what? Werewolves weren’t able to float.

He landed, swearing a blue streak.

Two flywaymen leaned over the edge and fired down on him.

He merely tilted his head back and bared his teeth.

Sophronia worked to lever herself out from under Captain Niall. He was bleeding from a shot to the shoulder, which seemed to have passed through and out his back.

“Captain Niall?”

“It’s not silver, Miss Temminnick. I’m in for a bit of a rough few hours but should be shipshape in no time.” He sounded more annoyed than hurt.

The dewan walked back toward them, looking very put-upon… and very hairy and, well, dangly. Oh, dear, and Dimity was running over to them. How on earth was Dimity going to react to dangly bits? *Will she faint? She’ll probably faint.*

Sophronia righted herself and looked over Captain Niall’s equally naked body. “Captain, would you mind shifting a little to the…” She went perfectly still; horror hit so hard it felt as if her skin would crawl off her flesh.

Soap?

Soap was lying, fallen and still, a surprised look on his face, clutching at the side of his chest, where a great deal of blood was pouring out of him and onto the grass. A *very* great deal indeed.

Strangely, Sophronia’s mind kept on with her previous thought. *Oh, dear, that amount of blood will certainly make Dimity faint.*

She let out a raw scream, like that of an animal at the slaughter. It was coming out of her own mouth, but she couldn’t control it. And then she was moving, shoving away poor Captain Niall, her arms no longer weak from shoveling coal. She threw herself across the distance separating her from Soap and knelt next to him.

“Miss, what a noise,” reprimanded Soap, his voice a whisper.

Sophronia stopped screaming. “Soap,” she said hoarsely, “I forbid you to die.”

“Now, miss, that’s not fair. You know I always try to do as you ask. This time it might not be up to me, and I hate to disappoint you.”

Sophronia placed both her hands over his, pressing against the wound. But there was so much blood. It was a litany in her head, *so much blood*. She couldn’t do anything. For the first time in her life there wasn’t a single action Sophronia could take, no information to discover, no trick to pull, no climbing to do, no action to turn about and bend to her ends.

Captain Niall came over. Captain Niall could save Soap. He was trained on the battlefield, accustomed to bullet wounds.

“Let me see, child,” he said, not unkindly. He pulled away her blood-covered hands.

Soap looked pale. Sophronia hadn't thought that possible. Normally her Soap was dark as Christmas cake and just as full of nutty goodness. He seemed flat and empty now.

The dewan was there, standing a little back. "Goodness' sake, what's wrong *now*?" He was not intentionally unkind; at the sight of Soap's wound his gruffness turned soft. "Ah, dear me."

Soap's eyes were emptying. There was no twinkle there anymore.

I'll take serious and longing over empty. "Oh, please, Soap, please don't die. What'll I do without you? Who'll keep me grounded?"

"Now, now, miss, don't be silly, I never was all that…" His voice faded off. Then he said, as if surprised, "Burns a bit, that does."

Captain Niall looked up from his examination. "No good, I'm afraid. Even if we had a surgeon to hand, looks like it's gone through to the gut, nothing fixes that. I'm so very sorry."

Sophronia barely registered that Dimity and Sidheag had joined them. Her mind had no thought in it but blood.

Sidheag knelt next to her. Reserved, austere Sidheag was weeping openly. Tears carved rivulets down her soot-covered face. Dimity stood back, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes wide in horror.

"You're not fainting?" Sophronia inquired, dumbly. Her voice sounded as if it came out of a mechanical—tinny, distanced, unemotional.

"This is too serious for fainting," replied Dimity. And then, because they'd been friends for so long, "What are we going to do?"

Sophronia felt her face tingle. *I'm supposed to be able to fix things*. She wanted to scream again, and vomit, and cry all at once. It felt as if the skin around her eyes would split open under the strain. And there was so much blood, and nothing she could do. There was *nothing* she could do.

"Well," said the dewan, "at least it's not someone important."

Sophronia rounded on him. "You!" There was no *my lord*. She pointed a finger into his chest. She was about two heads shorter and half his weight.

He didn't know how to respond. "Yes, little miss?"

"You're an Alpha, aren't you?"

"Of course, miss."

"True Alpha?"

"Of course, miss!"

"Bite him."

“What!”

“Go on, bite him!”

The dewan looked utterly confused at being ordered around by a small bundle of girl who was apparently quite insane.

But Lady Kingair added her insistence to the demand. “I think you should, my lord. He’d make a fine werewolf. He’s a good lad, strong and fit, nice age for it. Healthy, apart from the bullet wound.”

“But he’s”—the dewan struggled—“he’s not *one of us*!”

Sophronia said, “You take lower class for clavigers all the time. In fact, we were taught that you prefer them, unlike the vampires. What’s wrong with Soap?”

“He isn’t a claviger! He hasn’t been prepared. He hasn’t been trained in what to expect. He’s not ready. He’s not petitioned. He’s not paid his dues in service. It’s against the supernatural order.” The dewan protested. “He’s not from England!”

“He most certainly is! He’s from Tooting Beck!” protested Sophronia.

The dewan said, “I mean, his skin color!”

“It’s a perfectly lovely color!” protested Dimity. *Dimity, of all people.*

“He said he’d consider it. He was talking like he’d try, just the other night,” insisted Sophronia.

Soap blinked at the argument going on around him. “Yes,” he croaked.

“See that! Go on, then, you bite him, my lord, prove you’re the superior Alpha.”

The dewan threw his hands up. “That is *not* how it works.”

Sophronia scrabbled for something to threaten him with. She hadn’t a sundowner weapon. She hadn’t even a silver knife. The dewan was too strong for her to attack him outright, anyway; he’d simply brush her aside.

She had nothing but bargaining left. And she could think of only one thing the dewan might want. She bartered herself. “Do this and when I’m trained I’ll indenture to you as an intelligencer. I’m good, you ask Captain Niall. And when I’m done, I’ll be even better. I’ll be the best there is, just so you won’t regret it.”

Captain Niall said, “Miss Temminnick, is this wise?”

The dewan seemed even more startled by this attempt at bribery, but he did pause. He looked down at Soap and then up at Captain Niall. “Is she *that* good?”

“One of the best Mademoiselle Geraldine’s has had in a long while. She will be an asset to whoever holds her contract in whatever form.”

Competitive instinct. Werewolves had a strong competitive instinct; Sophronia played on that. “Mrs. Barnaclegoose wants me.”

“Mrs. Who?”

She tried another one. “Lord Akeldama has already given me patron gifts.”

“Has he, indeed?”

That was a name he knew.

The dewan appeared to be considering everything that had happened recently—the fact that Sophronia had kidnapped a train and scared off a duke. But he was no fool. Only a cautious werewolf could have survived so long a loner and sit in the queen’s shadow. “It’s a fair offer. But you understand our deal will stand whether my bite is successful or not?”

Hope sprang in Sophronia’s chest. Hope and fear and horror, but mostly hope. “I understand Soap’s survival is not a matter of your ability. It is a matter of his soul.”

“Or lack thereof. And you are willing to risk his life and your future on such a small chance?”

Soap was limp and silent now, his eyes heavy lidded. They were running out of time.

Sophronia took a breath, face still tingling with the strain. “I am.”

The dewan nodded, decided. “Very well, then, I will try. It would be better, ladies, if you were not present. This is not a pretty undertaking. Captain, if you would?”

Captain Niall limped around and forcibly picked Sophronia and Sidheag up, one under each arm, and carried them away. Meekly, Dimity followed, carrying Bumbersnoot under her own arm in a similar manner.

Captain Niall deposited them down near the track, far enough away so they could not turn to see what happened, but not so far that they could not hear.

It was not a pleasant symphony. There were slavering growls and groans, crunches and slurps, moans and cracks. Soap made barely any noise, too weak. There was no doubt he would have screamed if he could. Sophronia knew it was painful. Captain Niall said it hurt every time but it was worse at the beginning. It was an awful way to die, trying for

immortality, and most people did die.

Sidheag was sick all over the rail. This was a little startling, because she was the only one to have seen or heard such a thing before. Captain Niall held her steady and soothed her softly. Perhaps that was the problem, perhaps she knew too much of what was happening. And Soap was her friend, too. Sophronia tried not to think about it.

Sophronia only sat, shaking. Had she damned Soap to a gruesome death, alone at the jaws of a beast? Had she made everything worse? Had she the right to make such a choice for him at all? Even if he had claimed that this was what he wanted. She had sworn she wouldn't help, and now she'd made it happen. *My word is worth nothing*. Dimity huddled next to her, patting her futilely on one shoulder, telling her over and over again that it would be all right. Everything would turn out for the best, in the end.

Eventually, the sounds stopped and the quiet of night descended and there was nothing but stillness.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

He will have to stay with me." The dewan spoke softly over Soap's sleeping form.

There was blood smeared about the dewan's mouth and down into the hair of his chest. He was trying futilely to wipe it off with a rag. It helped to think that he was a very sloppy eater and they had just finished a tomato soup course. Sophronia suppressed a hysterical thought—*a Soap course!*

She was sitting with Soap's head in her lap. It might have been awkward or embarrassing, particularly in public—although after everything that had happened, what did Sophronia care two figs for that anymore?—except that Soap's head was that of a wolf. So was the rest of him. His fur was very thick and coarse and pitch black, like the coal for his beloved boilers. *He'll never float again*, thought Sophronia. He lay in the deep sleep of an exhausted puppy, but his wounds were healing. Right before Sophronia's eyes the bullet wound was closing and new fur growing over it. And his savaged neck, a gift from the dewan, was knitting back together like cloth under the invisible hand of an expert seamstress. The dewan had explained that newly made werewolves stayed in wolf form for the entirety of their first night. Soap had better do so, anyway, to accelerate his healing.

"Stay with you? While you deal with the Kingair Pack?"

"No, Miss Temminnick, I don't believe you take my meaning. He'll have to stay with me for a long time. I'm a loner, I have no pack, neither does he, but as I've shifted him"—there was pride in the dewan's voice; to metamorphose a new werewolf successfully was rare—"he must stay with

me to learn control. It's my responsibility to teach him."

"How long will it take?" Sophronia was simply glad Soap wasn't dead. Separation seemed a paltry price to pay.

"Years, even decades."

That is a long time.

"It depends on who he is."

That part, Sophronia could answer. "He's a good man, my lord. You'll like him. Smart and capable and hardworking and funny and fun and a leader, in his way, and…"

"I understand, Miss Temminnick," and he sounded as if he understood more than he let on, more than just her words, "but sometimes men are different as wolves."

"Not my Soap."

"We shall see." The dewan finished with the rag and tossed it aside. If the cold night air gave him any trouble, he didn't show it. "I might have to keep him a secret, for a while." He didn't explain the statement, but Sophronia smelled werewolf politics all over it. "I trust you and your friends will be discreet?"

Sophronia arched a brow at him. "Intelligencer trained, my lord."

He chuckled as if at a joke, then sobered. "I won't hold you to our bargain. A new werewolf is gift enough. It happens so rarely."

Sophronia was honestly surprised and even a little touched. "I keep my word, my lord. In this, if nothing else. If you'll only allow me to finish my schooling first?" *Plus, I have Picklemen to thwart.* Like it or not, with one bullet Duke Golborne had decided Sophronia's position. Every part of her was now bent on undermining his plans. She no longer cared what the Picklemen intended, she was going to stop them. No one shot her Soap!

Captain Niall said, from where he was sitting with Sidheag nearby, "I'd take her up on it, my lord. You'll be a good fit, all three of you."

The dewan nodded. "Very well. Patronage it is. And don't think I've forgotten your commitment, Captain. We need to get back on the run as soon as this new pup has mastered his paws."

Sophronia asked, too casually, "Why *do* you need Captain Niall, sir?"

"No hidden agenda there, little spy. He's to take over as Alpha of Kingair. Always was the intent. I can't leave them leaderless, not as I'm shipping them out with the Coldsteam Guards in a month. Exile as

punishment for attempted treason. India is the best place for them, fighting on the front. Keep them distracted from their little plots. Keep them away from Lord Maccon."

Sophronia was confused. "But much as I respect the captain, he told us he isn't a real Alpha." He'd said as much to the students on several occasions, without any shame. Some werewolves were Alphas, some weren't. *Only Alphas think it matters. Frankly, I prefer not,* he'd said. *Alphas tend not to live all that long.*

"No, but he's the best loner I've got in England right now. And he is a passing good military captain."

"Oh, thank you kindly, dewan." Captain Niall did not look particularly upset by the insult. Perhaps it wasn't an insult.

As the dewan was to be her patron, Sophronia figured he might as well get accustomed to her questioning him, so she said, "But Captain Niall didn't do anything wrong! It isn't fair that he be punished with them."

"All too often, being a werewolf isn't fair. Your friend there will have to learn that soon, too."

Sophronia reflected on her own reaction to Soap's affections. "I think that's one thing he's accustomed to already, my lord."

The dewan said, "I think we can move him now."

"I have a suggestion," said Sophronia. "If we could find some coal and get that train up and running—why not just take it north, as we intended? You can travel during the day and night that way, and won't lose time tonight while Soap sleeps. You'll have to take Sidheag with you, of course. She knows how to drive the train."

The dewan was intrigued despite himself. "I could declare the train property of the Crown. Vampires stashed some fancy tech on it, you say? Well, if the Picklemen want it, might be a good idea to hide it away in Scotland."

Sophronia heartily agreed. "Give the transmitter to Kingair. It'll be safe in werewolf hands. It'll be a little while before the pack leaves, correct? By then they will have made it impossible for the Picklemen or the vampires to retrieve it."

The dewan was looking at Sophronia with new eyes. "I see what you mean, Captain."

Sophronia continued to stroke Soap's fur, unconcerned by this scrutiny.

The dewan surprised her, though. “While you have been plotting, little miss, so have I.” He turned to look at Sidheag, who was sitting only slightly too close to Captain Niall.

“It seems all this bother is because I ignored your request to join the pack, Lady Kingair. I realize now that even if I order you back to that school, you’ll keep running away. Send the pack off to India and next thing I know, you’ll stow away on a steamer.”

Sidheag gave him an enigmatic look.

Sophronia watched this exchange from under lowered lids.

“You’re a little young for marriage,” said the dewan. His eyes were speculative.

Sidheag looked startled at that.

“But I think a long engagement would cover all but the sternest of societal sticklers. If you’re in foreign climes, no one will notice how long you take, and if you’re married by the time you get back, no one will be the wiser. Overseas campaigns can take decades.”

Everyone was looking confused.

Sidheag said, “I don’t follow, my lord.”

“I’ll send the announcement to the *Chirrup*,” said the dewan to Captain Niall.

Captain Niall nodded. He didn’t look upset, only resigned.

Sidheag cottoned on at last. “Oh, dear me no! I mean, I couldn’t. I mean, I couldn’t force him into anything. What an awful thing to do!”

“Enough. You cannot object to an arranged marriage. You, a single young lady, wish to take up residence with a pack of werewolves. Lord Maccon is gone, and in the absence of blood relations, you at least must be engaged!” The dewan was not to be argued with. Not again in the same night.

Dimity piped up with, “He’s right, you know, Sidheag. And you could always cry off later, I mean overseas, if you really wanted to.”

Sidheag looked sideways at the handsome werewolf captain. “You don’t object?”

Captain Niall said, face impassive, “It’s a fair arrangement, and Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott is correct. It would help to cement my claim to Kingair Pack leadership, if I were engaged to the Lady of Kingair.”

“That sounds sensible enough,” replied Sidheag, sounding a little

disappointed.

Then the werewolf smiled at her, shyly. “You’re far too young for me, of course. But with a long engagement, perhaps I might be given the chance to earn your affection?”

Sidheag ducked her head, self-conscious. “I’d like that.”

The dewan looked self-satisfied, as if he’d suspected this result.

Dimity sighed at the romance of it all. “Imagine, a long overseas engagement, how marvelous!”

Sophronia’s heart sank a little. First Soap and now Sidheag. Life was going to be lonely at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s. But she was excited for her friend; after all, this was what Sidheag wanted—to be with her pack.

The dewan slapped his hands together and rubbed them, the clapping sound jarring in the damp night. “Good, that’s settled, then. Now I’m going to go see about some coal for this train of yours. Captain, if you’ll get the party there and settled? Ladies”—he looked severely at Dimity and Sophronia—“I’ll buy you two first-class tickets back to Wootton Bassett at the next station. And some proper attire.”

Considering the fact that he was still naked, both girls giggled.

The dewan trudged off into the night, to change shape behind a bush somewhere.

Captain Niall stood and, like a proper suitor, kept his top hat held in the defensive position. He turned to offer Sidheag his free hand. “My lady?”

Sidheag took it, graciously. Her long, angular face wore an expression of wonder that made it almost handsome. *Whatever this relationship she develops with Captain Niall becomes, it will alter her forever*. It wasn’t so awful a thing that Sidheag would not be returning to Mademoiselle Geraldine’s. *She doesn’t need finishing school anymore, anyway.*

Dimity bumped against Sophronia. “Don’t be sad, you still have me and Bumbersnoot.”

Captain Niall let go of Sidheag’s hand and scooped up Soap’s limp wolf body with one arm. He’d recovered entirely from his own bullet wound. Even though Sophronia knew from experience that Soap was no lightweight, Captain Niall made it look easy. Soon Soap, too, would boast that casual werewolf strength. Soon Soap, too, would have that controlled, powerful way of moving. Would he tie a top hat to his head? Sophronia wondered.

She and Sidheag and Dimity trailed behind the captain back to the train.

“An arranged marriage. Sidheag, are you certain you don’t mind?” asked Sophronia.

“Who else would have me?” joked Sidheag.

Dimity said, “You have excellent standing!”

“And that’s about all I have.”

“Do stop being silly,” reprimanded Sophronia, perhaps too sharply. She was exhausted by the physical and emotional trials of the last few days.

Sidheag replied, startled into honesty. “He understands me, I understand him. Good marriages have been built on less.”

“Why, Sidheag, could it be you are a little enamored with the good captain already?” Dimity’s eyes shone.

Sidheag said, gruff and sharp, “Of course I am. Who at the school isn’t?”

Sophronia understood that it wasn’t her own feelings that worried Sidheag. “He will learn to love you. You’re quite worthy of it.”

“The way he cared for you after the masquerade, I rather think he fancies you already.” Dimity was disposed to be less practical on the matter.

Sidheag nodded, looking optimistic. “We will learn to love each other; it will all work out in the end.” This was remarkably prosaic, even for her. “And I get to be with my pack, and I get to travel. That’ll be fun.”

Dimity clasped her hands. “The grand tour!”

“I hardly think fighting in the front lines of the British Army is a tour,” corrected Sophronia.

Dimity sighed. “Why must you always crush my fantasies?”

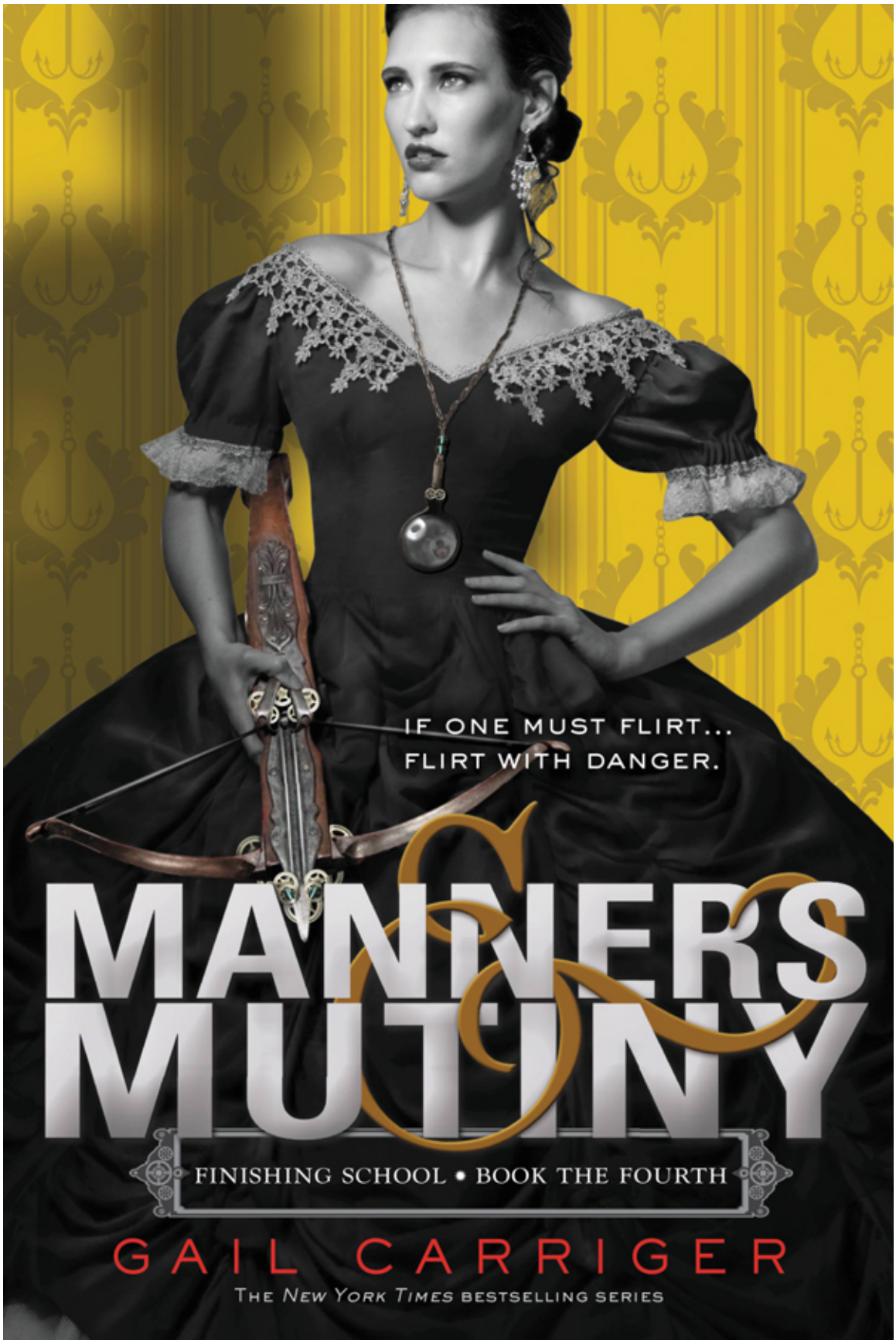
“Sorry, Dimity, forget I said anything. Well, Sidheag, I, for one, will miss you terribly. How am I going to take down all the Picklemen in England without you?”

Sidheag laughed. “Oh, you’ll manage.”

“I’ll help,” said Dimity. “And there’s always Bumbersnoot.” She patted the little mechanimal cheerfully.

Sophronia grinned. “Quite right, we can’t forget Bumbersnoot.”

The End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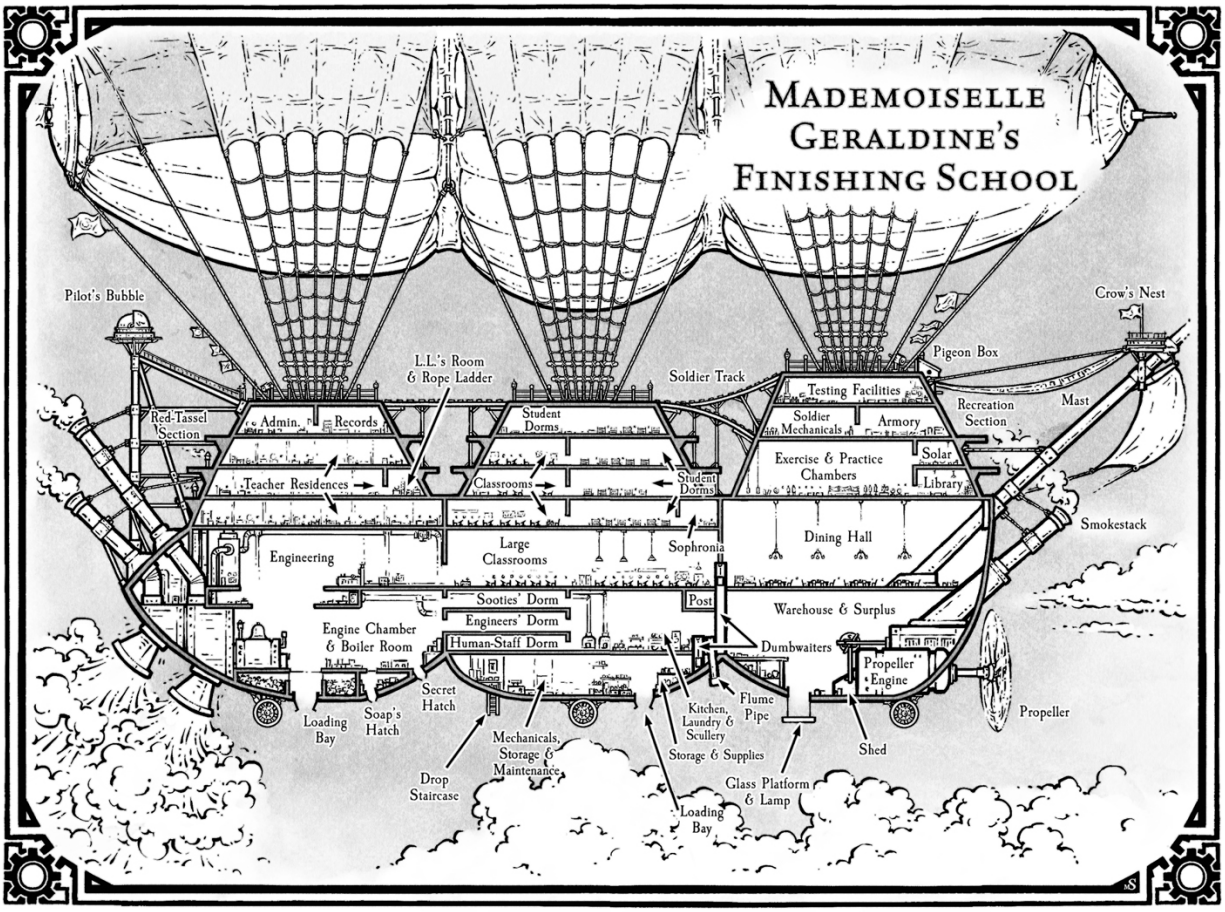
MANNERS & MUTINY

FINISHING SCHOOL ✹ BOOK THE FOURTH

GAIL CARRIGER

Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston

Thanks to Kate for starting us all on this crazy float; to Kristin, who piloted the dirigible; and to Deirdre, who landed it. To Sophie, who was my sounding board. To all my lady sooties in the boiler room, making everything go, and to Mac, keeping everything sane. And to Staar Shmellow (and her friend Steve, who donated to Worldbuilders) for her invention of a Most Amazing Hat.


Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing School
Pilot's Bubble
L.L.'s Room & Rope Ladder
Soldier Track
Crow's Nest
Pigeon Box
Testing Facilities
Mast
Red-Tassel Section
Admin.
Records
Student Dorms
Soldier Mechanicals
Armory
Recreation Section
Solar
Exercise & Practice Chambers
Library
Teacher Residences
Classrooms
Student Dorms
Smokestack
Dining Hall
Engineering
Large Classrooms
Sophronia
Sooties' Dorm
Post
Warehouse & Surplus
Engineers' Dorm
Engine Chamber & Boiler Room
Human-Staff Dorm
Dumbwaiters
Propeller Engine
Secret Hatch
Flume Pipe
Kitchen, Laundry & Scullery
Loading Bay
Soap's Hatch
Propeller
Mechanicals, Storage & Maintenance
Storage & Supplies
Shed
Drop Staircase
Glass Platform & Lamp
Loading Bay

Incognito in Character

A ball, at last!" Dimity Plumleigh-Teignmott sank back into her chair in delight.

At the head table, Mademoiselle Geraldine finished her announcement with a similar collapse, stays heaving with repressed excitement. She would not be attending said ball, as she never left school grounds, but she appreciated that her young ladies of *quali-tay* were about to engage in a social event of *great import*. Lady Linette put a gentling hand to the headmistress's arm, wary of a full infection of flutterings.

It was too late. The school erupted into chatter.

"It's only Bunson's," Preshea Buss said to Dimity. "We know all the boys there, and most of the best prospects have gone on to university."

"Oh, buck up, Preshea, do. That means fresh meat. You should be thrilled, since you prefer your young men innocent and ripe for the plucking," shot back Sophronia.

Preshea couldn't refute that—in a way, it was quite the compliment. So she turned her back on Sophronia and her friends.

Sophronia sipped her tea, feeling victorious, green eyes assessing the reactions of those around her. Dimity's delight was to be expected. Agatha Woosmoss, their other close friend, was notably reticent when confronted with large gatherings involving the opposite sex. She had very flushed cheeks that suggested interest—or possibly paralytic fear. The debuts were in a tight huddle over the Scones of Iniquity and the Jam of Trepidation. Professor Braithwope was bouncing in his chair like a delighted baby,

although he would not be attending. Professor Lefoux's lip was curled in disgust as she stood to make the supervisory rounds.

"What to wear?" murmured Dimity, rolling a Chelsea bun between thumb and forefinger.

Professor Lefoux pounced. "Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, what are you doing to that bun? Your fingers are all over sticky. Only look at the crumbs. And you've misplaced currants. You should know better."

Dimity dropped the bun.

Sophronia jumped in. "We are working on a language for crumb and currant communication."

Professor Lefoux was not fooled. "Indeed? Pray continue."

"The number and location of the crumbs indicates intent."

"And the currants?"

"Instructions, of course."

"And how do you propose to control quantity when utilizing less adhesive bread items?"

"That requires further study." Sophronia was brazen to the end.

Professor Lefoux sniffed. "Perhaps you should stick to less messy forms of communication. But your inventiveness has merit."

It was, of course, impossible to tell whether this compliment was directed at the idea of a crumb communication system or whether Professor Lefoux was complimenting Sophronia on coming up with an excuse for Dimity's mishandling of buns. Whatever the case, Professor Lefoux caught sight of one of the debuts actually *tossing* her bun at another girl and dashed away without further comment.

Dimity ate her sticky treat before it could result in more unwanted attention. She shoved her empty crumb-covered plate in front of Sophronia. "Go on, then, read them."

Agatha giggled. "Like Madame Spetuna."

"What do the crumbs say of my future?" Dimity's round face was eager.

Sophronia bent over the carnage and muttered, "You shall marry well and live a long and happy life. So long as you avoid all contact with…" She drew out the suspense.

Dimity hung on her words. "Yes?"

"Sturgeon."

"What, the fish?"

“Sturgeon bodes you ill will. Beware, or all will be lost.”

Dimity grinned. “Oh goodness me, how ominous. And how damp.”

Agatha shoved her crumby plate across the table. “Do mine?”

Sophronia assumed a sepulchral tone. “You will cause a stir in high society with your wit and charm.” Agatha blushed. “So long as you allow yourself to speak on occasion. Beware…”

“Beware what?”

“Philosophy!”

“Oh, good, I’m already quite wary. Do your own fortune?”

“Everyone knows a girl can’t predict her own future.” Out of the corner of her eye, Sophronia watched Professor Lefoux return to her seat. Lady Linette stood and began to move from one tea table to the next. She was making an announcement, gesticulating at each student in turn, and moving on, leaving behind a much quieter and more thoughtful gaggle.

Dimity took Sophronia’s plate. The Chelsea bun atop it was untouched.

Agatha looked bright eyed and inquisitive. “What does it say about our Sophronia, Dimity?”

“That she has terrible taste, and should know when to stop telling fibs and simply eat her bun.”

Agatha and Sophronia were both startled into a laugh.

Dimity ate Sophronia’s bun, since it was clear her friend wasn’t going to accord it gastronomic respect. Then she turned the conversation onto her favorite topic, attire. “So, what will you wear to the ball, Agatha?”

The redhead looked doubtful. She had recently exchanged much of her tubbiness around the middle for endowments further up. Mademoiselle Geraldine was most impressed by what she referred to as Miss Woosmoss’s *increased assets and aesthetic abilities*. Agatha was mortified. Fortunately, or unfortunately from Agatha’s perspective, she had a father who took a keen interest in the latest fashions—more for what it said about his means than for what it might do for his daughter’s standing. As a result, Agatha had many gowns to choose from.

No one asked Sophronia what she would wear. Her own figure was decent enough and had not shifted substantially during her time at Mademoiselle Geraldine’s Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality. Fortunate indeed, as she subsisted mainly on her sisters’ castoffs. Those sisters having married away, castoffs were increasingly rare. Sophronia had

only one ball gown, and it was a transformation dress that served double duty as her best visiting dress.

Despite her many options, Agatha was a problem. “I’d like to wear the mustard.”

Sophronia suppressed a choke.

Dimity was gentle with their friend. “Oh, but the pale lemon is much more stylish.”

Not to mention more becoming to her complexion, thought Sophronia.

“But the lemon is so very fluffy.” Agatha did not understand that this was a good thing.

Sophronia and Dimity exchanged a look.

“It has a much nicer cut,” Dimity pressed.

“It’s too low!” Agatha fluttered her hands about her chest.

Dimity was wistful. “Exactly! What I wouldn’t give to…” Dimity had tried every remedy for bust improvement that Mademoiselle Geraldine suggested, from massage with a tincture of myrrh, pimpernel, elder-flower, and rectified spirits, to preparations of nux vomica mixed with Madeira, to a diet composed mainly of comforting, breast-pampering foodstuffs. Dimity did not find the diet challenging, as it emphasized pastry, milk, potatoes, and similarly farinaceous foods. However, she was also avoiding tea and refraining from indulging in anger, grief, worry, and jealousy. Emotions, everyone knew, affected the size and quality of one’s endowments. But despite her efforts, nothing had, so far, *improved*.

“I should give you my share if I could.” Agatha was nothing if not generous.

Dimity was exactly as perceptive as people never gave her credit for. So she stopped pressuring Agatha and said to Sophronia, “You’re very subdued this evening. Are you nervous?”

“About a ball?” Sophronia was mock offended.

“About Felix being at the ball.”

Images flashed through Sophronia’s mind. Felix’s beautiful pale eyes lined in kohl. His dark hair. His leg bleeding. His warning her, too late. And that fateful shot, and Soap falling. It was all so complicated—and to think he was originally nothing more than a means for practicing flirtation. “I can handle our dear Lord Mersey.”

Dimity was unconvinced. “Oh, yes? Then explain the melancholy.”

“Perhaps I’m bored.”

“With what?” asked Agatha.

“Oh, you know. Flirting, pretty dress, espionage… death.”

Dimity huffed. “La you! I seem to remember someone enjoying Professor Braithwope’s lesson on resourceful reticules this afternoon. Even if he is all over dotty.”

“True. Perhaps I’m restless.”

“School not exciting enough after stealing trains?” Agatha sounded sympathetic.

Dimity cocked her head. “Hogwash. Mention of the ball brought this on. If it’s not Felix, then—” She paused. “Oh. You miss Mr. Soap. It’s not like he could have actually escorted you, Sophronia.”

“I know.” Of its own accord, Sophronia’s hand delved into a secret pocket where Soap’s latest missive, months old, rested crumpled and well read. That she heard from him at all was a joy, but that someone else was teaching him to read and write was bittersweet. “He seems very far away.”

“Poor little bean.” Dimity was a good enough friend to sympathize with Sophronia’s heartache, even though she felt that the object of that affection was inappropriate.

Sophronia appreciated this. And part of her sorrow was that, in the end, she agreed with Dimity. Soap *was* inappropriate. What future did they have outside of social ostracism? He was, in the eyes of society, the wrong class, the wrong skin color, and now, the wrong species. “Ugh, this is getting maudlin. There is nothing any of us can do about it.”

Sophronia groped desperately for the one topic that would guarantee her best friend’s distraction. “So, Dimity, what will *you* wear to the ball?”

Dimity charged forth to conquer the conversation, taking no prisoners. “I was thinking about the pink, but it is a few seasons old and I *have* worn it before. What do you think? It projects a certain happy innocence that might be exactly the *thing* when surrounded by evil geniuses. Then again, there’s the jewelry to consider. I’d have to wear my pearls, and pearls may be too drab for a winter ball. But they are really the only thing that works with the pink. So then I thought perhaps the orange. It is such a bold statement. The level of maturity and consideration required to wear orange at my age might make the young men take me seriously. But do I *want* to be taken seriously? And then I thought the peach, but it never really recovered from the whole

kidnapping and werewolf transport operation. So then I thought—”

Sophronia and Agatha were content to let her ramble. There was something comforting about the force of intellect Dimity brought to bear on her apparel. Manipulation through proper dress was by far her best subject. She could prattle on happily about exactly the amount of disregard engendered by eight ruffles, as opposed to six, and why one might, or might not, want to add a sash into the equation.

Then Lady Linette arrived at their table. “Your attention, please. Miss Buss, you as well. Now, I appreciate you are all excited about the winter ball, but we teachers are adding our own special twist to the occasion.”

No one at the table was surprised. They were old hats at this kind of thing. Perhaps not *old hats*, but instead, they were *last season’s gloves*, soiled but still suited to any occasion, including inclement weather and dead body disposal.

“You are all to attend. Yes, even you, Miss Woosmoss. But you are not attending as yourselves. Instead, in consideration of our recent schoolwide focus on identity shift, you are to attend this ball as *each other*, within your year group. As you four are established students, better acquainted with one another than the younger girls, I expect you to execute perfectly *and* set a good example. You will, of course, be evaluated on your performances. Miss Temminnick”—she pointed to Sophronia—“you are to go as Miss Woosmoss. Miss Woosmoss as Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott. Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott as Miss Buss. And Miss Buss as Miss Temminnick.”

Preshea gave Sophronia a horrified look.

Sophronia was thoughtful. There were dangerous avenues of mockery inherent in this assignment. They would all have to be careful not to insult the person they emulated, while doing a good enough job to convince the teachers. That was probably part of the test. No doubt they would each be asked how well they thought the other person enacted them.

Agatha looked terrified and Dimity nonplussed.

Preshea wanted the important particulars. “Do we have to borrow each other’s clothing? Sophronia only has one ball gown. Could I use something of mine and make it look as old-fashioned and boring as her dress?” Preshea always spoke in a clipped tone. Sophronia thought she would have to work on her diction if she wanted to sound like Sophronia.

Lady Linette had been expecting that question. “You may. It’s better if

you can borrow, but I'm well aware not all of you have the means, or the ability, size-wise, to dress as one another. You are to obey the style, but not necessarily the stitching, of the assignment—as it were."

Sophronia was privately relieved. She'd hate to give her only ball gown to Preshea. The girl would spill cranberry cordial all over it out of pure spite.

Lady Linette drifted off, having thrown a veritable stoat among the woodcocks.

The heavy silence was broken by Preshea's loud "Well, at least I didn't get *Agatha*. Can you imagine? *Me* in olive drab." Her various cohorts at the next table tittered obligingly.

Agatha, accustomed to such barbs, didn't flinch. "I will have to wear so many sparkles."

"Can I dress you as me, Agatha?" Dimity fairly vibrated. "Oh, you will look stunning!"

Agatha was doubtful. "Will I fit your bodice?"

Dimity's smile was evil. "You'll have to cinch very tight."

Agatha blanched and said hurriedly to Sophronia, "You can borrow anything you like of mine, of course. The lemon ruffles, even, although we'll have to lengthen the skirt."

Sophronia thought yellow would make her look jaundiced. It suited Agatha well enough, but Sophronia had indifferent brown hair, skin prone to freckles, and the occasional spot. It would play hell with her complexion. "Perhaps the brown stripe?" she asked hesitantly.

Dimity was appalled. "Sophronia, you'll look like a gangly sparrow! No offense, Agatha."

"None taken."

"Yes, but it'll be easier to add a ruffle to the bottom."

Dimity had to agree with this assessment. She had it the easiest, for Preshea was always elegant. Well, perhaps that wasn't easy for *Dimity*. She'd have to leave off her customary jewelry, and the personality switch was going to be rough. Dimity would have to be cruel and calculating.

Sophronia figured Lady Linette had chosen specifically with such challenges in mind. Each of them had been assigned the girl most unlike her own personality. Although Sophronia bet Lady Linette was in for a surprise. She had a certain amount of Agatha in her. And she'd wager good money

Dimity could be quite mean—she was plenty brutal to her brother given the slightest provocation. Sophronia also felt Agatha had untapped sparkling abilities. Even Preshea was more like Sophronia than she liked to admit. They certainly both had the same interest in calculated manipulation. It was only that Sophronia had a conscience and Preshea didn't. She was grateful Preshea had been assigned to act like her instead of one of the others. Preshea's goal would be to humiliate the object of her imitation, as well as obey the letter of the assignment. She would be good at both. Sophronia was able to withstand humiliation—her friends were not.

Thus the young ladies, outfitted in each other's finest—and each other's personalities—descended upon Bunson and Lacroix's Boys' Polytechnique for a winter ball a few weeks later. There existed no little animosity between the two schools. They disagreed on the subjects of politics, supernatural acceptance, techniques of instruction, and teatime provisions. But they were linked by necessity. Bunson's town, Swiffle-on-Exe, was the way station for Mademoiselle Geraldine's. And really, what other partners could girls trained in espionage find at short notice, except boys trained as evil geniuses?

The boys always expected something odd from Geraldine's girls, but they seemed unclear about what exactly was occurring. Nevertheless, they soldiered manfully in, requesting dances from out-of-character young ladies. Bunson's was not a particularly attractive school, but they'd done up the ballroom to an extreme. Evil genius-ness was like that—showy. There were automated lanterns high above filled with a yellow-colored noxious gas, suspended on small rails from the ceiling. Four mechanicals had been reconfigured as a string quartet in one corner, where they played a rotating series of five, yes, *five* whole songs, over and over. *Someone's final project*, Sophronia heard the whispers. *So good he'd been recruited directly out of school as a Cultivator-class Pickleman.* Other mechanicals circulated, carrying large brass trays loaded with nibbles and punch. Sophronia was suspicious of some of the nibbles (they could be explosive), so she stuck with recognizable foodstuffs. Someone managed to dump absinthe in the punch, and it took ten whole minutes for Professor Lefoux to discover it

and order a new batch. Things were jolly indeed, for ten minutes.

The boys had cleaned up as much as could be expected from those inclined toward evil. Civilities were observed to even Lady Linette's standards. *Carnets de bal* were requested and filled in. Sophronia was proud of hers—it doubled as a garrote, among other things. She did not hold it up eagerly, as her compatriots did—that was not Agatha's way. She skulked to the back of the room, finding refuge in a small crook-legged chair hidden behind a razor-edged metal fern.

Sophronia watched interactions through its fanged fronds. There were a number of *understandings* between Geraldine's girls and Bunson's boys, despite a school policy that insisted these boys were for practice, not permanent liaison. There were certainly enough long-running courtships for the young men to know something was unusual. They approached customary objects of flirtation only to be confused when conversations deviated or did not occur at all. The face was the same, but the dress and interaction were at odds with all previous encounters.

Preshea—as Sophronia—was flirting outrageously. Yet Lady Linette did not object. *Am I that much of a flirt?* Sophronia wondered. Preshea was eyeing Felix Mersey and edging toward him. Sophronia hid a sneer. Preshea would have done that no matter what. But it showed she was unaware of recent history. It was true Sophronia might have showed him favor, a year ago. Not anymore. In this Preshea got her entirely wrong.

Felix hadn't seen Sophronia yet, and if she had her way, he never would. He looked older and tired. His hair was too long and his eyes slightly sunken, without their customary kohl liner. Had he been ill? Or was that guilt? He still looked better than any other man in the room, but her heart no longer fluttered at the sight. Instead she felt… what? A slight nausea at possible confrontation, mixed with minor disgust. Sophronia had cut off all correspondence with him last February. She'd returned his letters unopened.

"Crikey, Sophronia, what's the matter with your lot this evening?" Of all people, Pillover had found her hiding spot.

Dimity's little brother had a longstanding relationship of such casualness with Sophronia as to make him treat the boundaries set by polite society with brotherly disregard. Sophronia had learned to accept this treatment, although she found it uncalled for; after all, she already had more than her fair share of brothers. Sophronia and Pillover were also, so far as

Sophronia's mother was concerned, engaged.

"Here you are, lurking like some reluctant hedgehog. Most out of character. Why, for goodness' sake?" Pillover must be ruffled. Usually he never said more than one sentence in a row.

Sophronia looked at her toes so as not to show interest in the dance. She dearly loved dancing, but Agatha hated it. Ordinarily she would have said, "Pillover, you're positively loquacious. Are you running a fever?" But Agatha wouldn't, so Sophronia didn't.

He looked her over, head to toe. "And I can't spot Bumbersnoot on you anywhere." He plopped down next to her without waiting for an invitation. He had shot up into gangliness over the course of their acquaintance, accidentally cultivating an air of dissolute idleness that most ladies found fascinating. They thought he had a broken heart in need of repairs. In actuality, he was conjugating Latin verse in his head. As there was nothing Pillover disliked more than being the object of feminine attention, he remained utterly unmoved by their interest. This, of course, only made him more desirable.

"Sophronia?" Pillover had left off calling her Miss Temminnick shortly after she forced him to dress in her petticoat in order to escape Bunson's. Such intimacy demanded use of given names.

"Good evening, Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott." Sophronia was gravely formal. Several of her teachers were wending through the crowd. The Bunson's professors thought this was normal chaperoning, but the ladies knew better. Sophronia suspected Sister Mattie—or more properly Sister Mathilde—of being within eavesdropping distance at that very moment.

"Sophronia, for goodness' sake, snap out of it!"

"I assure you, Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott, I am in perfect health."

"You are behaving like a wilted violet. No, strike that, a wilted olive tree." Even Pillover didn't like Sophronia in Agatha's dress. "My sister has nary a sparkle in sight. And Miss Woosmoss looks like a"—words failed him—"chandelier in slippers!" He seemed most offended by this last. Pillover had a soft spot for Agatha. He thought her restfully chatter free—the most desirable quality in a girl. Sophronia suspected him of being distressed by the degree of attention Agatha—as Dimity—was garnering. The pink ball gown suited her very well. Her hair was a glossy pile of russet curls, dotted with silk flowers. Draped about her neck was a string of pearls

—her own and likely real. Her round cheeks were rosy from the attention, the dancing, and the embarrassment of both. Quite apart from everything else, they had, indeed, had to cinch the girl in *very* tight to fit her into Dimity's ball gown. The resulting décolletage could be seen from the aetherosphere.

Agatha had lamented this. "I look in imminent danger of spilling!"

"The gentlemen will be most intrigued," vowed Dimity. "And you can be certain if I had the assets I should do exactly that, so it isn't at all out of character. Simply beyond my ability."

"Oh, dear," wailed Agatha, nevertheless submitting to pink ruffles. She needed a high mark in this assignment. Agatha was in ever-great need of a high mark. So she cinched and took the consequences. Much to Pillover's disgust, his sister's predictions were correct. The gentlemen did seem most intrigued.

Dimity herself was milling around in a white dress with royal-blue trim. It was cut on elegant lines and not overly fluffy, making the most of her figure rather than trying to emphasize what she didn't have. She had ribbon rosettes of blue and white in her honey-colored hair, which was dressed fashionably but without fuss. She wore one expensive-looking diamond bangle and no other jewelry at all. The diamonds were fake, of course, but you'd never know without close inspection.

Preshea was wearing a lovely black gown with gray lace ruffles and wine trim. It was more modern and stylish than Sophronia could afford, but certainly to her taste. Preshea had fashioned a dog-shaped reticule, which she wore slung crosswise across her body. She was chatting companionably with one of the teachers. *Am I really such a goody-goody, as well as a flirt?* wondered Sophronia. *Or is Preshea mocking me?*

Bumbersnoot, the real Bumbersnoot, was slouching about the cloakroom. Knowing her little dog mechanimal was a dead giveaway that she was not obeying the identity shift protocols, Sophronia had smuggled him in under Agatha's fur cape. She certainly wasn't going to loan him to Preshea, of all people!

Agatha twirled past in the arms of some handsome young buck.

Sophronia was pleased. "I think she's doing very well."

Pillover subsided into glumness, slouching forward and putting his elbows onto his knees and his chin into his hands. It was a shockingly

lower-class way to sit, as though he were in a public park, or worse, the House of Commons.

“Go cut in,” suggested Sophronia quietly. It was a non-Agatha suggestion, so she did her best to deliver it in an Agatha tone.

Pillover didn’t move. “I never,” he objected to the floor.

“You must act as if Agatha is your sister, or you won’t get anywhere.”

“*That* is a disgusting suggestion.”

Sophronia sighed. “No, I mean, treat her as you would a young lady of your sister’s type.”

“Dimity is a type? You mean, there may be *others*?” Pillover was horrified out of his moroseness.

“Do shove off, Pillover. How can I be a proper shrinking olive tree with you here? Shrinking olives are solitary creatures. Oh, and don’t forget,” she hissed, “we have to throw each other over at some point. I can’t afford to stay indefinitely engaged to you.”

Pillover looked a mite less glum at the prospect of a broken engagement. Accordingly, he stood and mooched away. He could be a bit of a wet blanket, but one had to admire a boy who followed instructions.

Sophronia continued to sit, watching her classmates employ each other’s personalities as weapons against the young men around them. It was almost pretty.

Dimity was twirled to a stop by a tall young man with unfortunate ears who looked most interested in further twirls. Dimity delivered what was clearly a barb about some other girl, and the young man laughed appreciatively. Dimity looked upset with herself, but soldiered gamely on into Preshea’s sour temper.

The tall boy was not alone, for as soon as she sat, Dimity was surrounded by interested parties. Sophronia was willing to wager her friend’s dance card was full. Dimity sent various admirers off in pursuit of nibbles and punch, much as Preshea would have, leaving herself accompanied by only the two most persistent. Through the cleared masses, Sophronia caught her eye.

Dimity gave the chin-tap fan signal of important information to impart.

Sophronia flicked open her own fan. It was her filigree bladed one, safely capped for the evening with a leather guard, and delicate enough to pass for a normal fan.

What? she fluttered at Dimity.

Dimity flicked hers open and gave the swirl and dip for *enemy among us*. Then she tilted her head, as if flirting with a pale-haired boy to her left, but really pointing Sophronia's attention to that side of the room.

A woman had entered the ballroom. Her hair was dressed in the high curls of maturity that Geraldine's girls were permitted to practice but not wear in public, so she was no student. She faced away from Sophronia, talking to Lady Linette. Even from the back, Sophronia's training told her many things. The woman's bearing marked her as an aristocrat, or at least trained to the correct posture to pass as one. Her hair was naturally blonde, and her dress was certainly Parisian—snow white with rose-pink ruffles, and silk roses sewn into the drapes of the overskirt and clustered at the puff of the daringly short sleeves. A coronet of roses, *real*, not silk, which meant hothouse, perched atop her hair, an amazing expense for a provincial school ball. Instead of a necklace, the stranger wore a lace ruff tied about her neck, likely to disguise the fact that she had vampire bite marks.

Sophronia knew who it was before she turned.

Monique de Pelouse.

INVASIONS AT A BALL

Why? Sophronia fluttered the question at Dimity. What on earth was Monique doing out of London during the holiday season? It was true much of the town shut down, but the vampires took that as an excuse to throw lavish parties.

Dimity couldn't answer even if she knew, for Monique left Lady Linette to stand in front of her instead. As Monique was a former student, fan fluttering communication was useless against her. She had left Mademoiselle Geraldine's to become a drone to Countess Nadasdy, vampire queen of the Westminster Hive, some years ago, but she would keep turning up, like grease at the top of the dishwater. At their last encounter, Sophronia had had the great pleasure of throwing her out of a train.

Dimity and Monique appeared to be exchanging pleasantries, of all things. Then Monique moved on about the room.

Sophronia sank into the shadows. She couldn't afford a confrontation with her old nemesis, not if she wished to stay in character. Sophronia had to bite down her pert answers at the best of times, and Monique practically begged for them. Agatha was never pert and rarely had answers. Better to avoid all contact.

So far as Sophronia knew, Monique's main drone assignment was to keep an eye on the Picklemen. Their free enhancements to all mechanicals over the past six months must have driven her crazy. Despite vampire opposition, anyone who owned a mechanical was delighted to see it

upgraded with a new crystalline valve frequensor, which reputedly fixed the spontaneous opera problem of last winter and improved performance.

Sophronia, her friends, Monique, the vampires, and a handful of others knew the real reason for the valves. The Picklemen wanted complete control over all the mechanicals in England. Yet since the upgrade, no attempt to seize that control had occurred. The vampires' fuss over the enhancements had been dismissed as supernatural hysteria by the government and passed unnoticed by the popular press. Everyone who knew there would be a problem was forced into waiting for that problem to occur. And they had no idea what the Picklemen intended to do with their army of mechanical domestic servants. Last time all they'd done was have them sing "Rule, Britannia!" What was next? A ruthless bout of ballet?

Still, if Monique is supposed to be monitoring the situation, static as it may be, what is she doing here?

Someone sat down in the chair recently vacated by Pillover.

"Ria, my dove, it has been too long."

Sophronia had actually relaxed her guard. *Debut move!* She marshaled her irritation into a defensive mask of Agatha-like nervousness. "Why, Lord Mersey, how do you do?"

"Like that, are we?"

"Pardon, sir?"

Felix was no intelligencer. His training was in machinations and evil machinery. He cut directly to the point, with no attempt at subterfuge, "He's my father, Ria. I had no choice."

There is always a choice, or at least evasive tactics, would have said Sophronia. "Why, my lord, I'm afraid I fail to follow your meaning," she said as Agatha.

"Please don't be like that. He is working to save the country. Save the Empire. His ends are noble."

How unexpectedly revealing. How much, Sophronia wondered, *can Agatha get out of Felix where Sophronia failed?* She had underestimated how much he wanted her good opinion. Not to mention how much frustration brought about confession.

"My lord, please, that isn't necessary."

"Ria! What else was I to do? Surely you would have done the same in my position."

White-hot anger almost threw Agatha out of Sophronia's head. She might be a spy, and a relatively good one, but she was loyal to her friends. Felix had betrayed them all, not only Sophronia, when he revealed their disguises. And then…

"Your father killed Soap," she hissed, breaking character.

Felix was cheered by her return to form. "Ria, my dove, look on the bright side, at least he has stopped trying to kill *you*."

Only because I've been safely at school for three-quarters of a year. If there was anywhere the Picklemen couldn't infiltrate, it was a mobile academy for female intelligencers.

She reached once more for Agatha's quiet spirit. "Oh, Lord Mersey, you are so droll. What makes you think I care two whits for your father's murderous opinion?" She tapped his arm with her fan in a self-conscious flirtation, as though she were awkwardly following instructions. On the pullback from the tap, she sent the wrist swirl signal with her closed fan, *Damsel in need of rescue*. She had no idea if Dimity would see, but she required an extraction.

Felix looked grim. "Back to that, are we? Very well, if you insist on playing games. Would you care to dance? You'd be afforded the opportunity to cut me in public by leaving me on the floor as per usual."

If Sophronia had any guilt over her shoddy behavior in the past, his ungentlemanly mention of it certainly cured her. She'd had good reason for abandoning him on the dance floor, every time. It was poor manners for him to discuss her indiscretions.

Then, of all people, Agatha came whirling up. Her partner, Lord Dingleproops, seemed taken with the pearl-drenched Agatha version of Dimity. Odd, as he had once rejected Dimity herself.

"My lord, might we rest a moment?" Agatha whipped out her fan, in evident need of cooling. *You requested rescue?* she signaled Sophronia.

Sophronia blew out her cheeks in a sigh of both exasperation and relief.

Agatha understood this silent commentary on social predicament. She turned her attention onto Felix. "Lord Mersey, how do you do this fine evening?"

Felix looked confused. Prior to that, Agatha had barely strung three words together in his presence. "Miss, uh, Woosmoss, is it?"

Agatha curtsied. "I understand from Lord Dingleproops that you are

something of a whiz with waistcoats? He claims you have three apparatus, a monocle, and a pack of cards stashed at all times. Is this true?"

Felix was no inferior gentlemen to resist a request from any lady when couched in such incontestable terms. He stood, bowing over Agatha's proffered hand. "Dear lady, indeed it is."

Agatha tittered. "La, my lord, how droll of you. Can you show me any of them without, ah-hem, unbuttoning?"

Sophronia was driven to gasp! To mention the act of undress, and to a young man of little acquaintance! That was flirting beyond even Dimity. Agatha was taking things too far.

Sophronia used her fan to disguise shock.

Felix and Lord Dingleproops found the mention of buttons enchanting.

"Oh, la, I'm positively parched." Agatha grabbed Felix's arm and sailed smoothly away, angling toward the punch.

Felix could do naught but follow.

It was, Sophronia had to admit, a perfect extraction. Agatha had hidden depths of shallowness. Or she was a better study than anyone thought, and merely needed a different personality to bring out her abilities. Or she had partaken too freely of the absinthe-spiked punch.

Sophronia turned her attention back to the gathering. Monique was making her way around the room. Whatever she was looking for, she hadn't found it. Sophronia harbored a brief, horrible thought that her old enemy was hunting for her. They were, after a fashion, allied against the Picklemen. Perhaps she had a message from the dewan, Sophronia's soon-to-be patron.

Then someone *else* invaded her corner. Clearly it was not so hidden as she'd hoped. This time, however, it was a welcome invasion.

Genevieve Lefoux, once known as Vieve and currently known as Gaspar Lefoux, appeared at Sophronia's elbow. Now twelve years old, Vieve had shot up and was almost as tall as Sophronia. She was looking likely to be as much a beanpole as her aunt. Since she intended a long career disguised as a man, Vieve was no doubt delighted to find the Lefoux genes running true to form, or more accurately, true to figure.

At Bunson's, Vieve purported to be Professor Lefoux's nephew, who exhibited such extraordinary engineering talent it had forced Bunson's to take on a French charity case. Although she had never officially been a

finishing school student, preferring to spend her time in the boiler room, something had rubbed off. She had grasped enough espionage to be good at maintaining her ties to Mademoiselle Geraldine's, without exposing her connection or her gender.

Vieve bowed low over Sophronia's gloved hand.

Sophronia pretended nervousness at having been discovered by a stranger. "Oh. Um, how do you do, Mr.…?" But her green eyes sparkled with delight. She could not deny a real affection for the funny creature, and had genuinely missed her company. Still, she did not break Agatha's character, nor did she pretend they had met before. She was, after all, a Geraldine's girl.

Thus it was for Vieve to open the conversation. "Good evening, miss. Please excuse me for approaching you without introduction." Vieve was in full impeccable evening dress from head to toe. Her dark hair was cropped short. She did not sport the mustache she once coveted, nor had she faked a deeper voice—as yet she had no need. Even with dimples and a feminine cast to her cheekbones and nose, she had the manners and movements of a young man. It was impressive.

"Mr. Lefoux, at your service, Miss…?"

"Temminnick," said Sophronia tremulously.

"Indeed, yes. Although I did think, for a moment, from certain descriptions prior to this greeting, that you might be Miss Woosmoss. Quite apart from the hair color, of course." In addition to a head for engineering, Vieve had an eye for fashion. Not to mention a familiarity with most of Sophronia's age group.

Sophronia allowed a hint of a smile. "I can see how you might make such an error."

Thus they understood one another. Vieve knew Sophronia was under an assignment to act like Agatha. Sophronia knew that Vieve had probably figured out who the others were as well.

"Would you care to dance, Miss Temminnick?" offered Vieve, gravely, as though to a wallflower cousin.

Sophronia knew such a dance could only lend Vieve's disguise credence. She also knew Agatha might dance with Professor Lefoux's nephew if pressed. So she agreed.

Vieve was an expert at the reel and a decent lead. She'd obviously been

practicing, or been made to learn. They danced the first pass through in awkward silence, as befitted Agatha.

On the second, Vieve said, dimples flashing, “I understand we share an acquaintance?” Her eyes shifted to Monique.

Sophronia hesitated. She needed the information Vieve implied she had, but she also needed to stay in character. “Unusual, don’t you feel, for an ex-student to return to a dance such as this?”

“Very,” agreed Vieve. “And we have had other visitors, of late.”

Here comes the important part. “Have you? How fascinating. Do tell?”

“Very well-dressed visitors. Except, they strangely insisted on green bands about their hats.”

Picklemen! Sophronia’s slight panic showed in a missed step. Fortunately, it lent credence to her Agatha. It was at about this point in any dance that Agatha became uncomfortable, stumbled, and found a way to end the prolonged contact with a member of the opposite sex.

“How recently, if I may ask?”

“Oh, you may.” Vieve was gloriously mild in her delivery. “They could still be here, on school grounds.”

Ah-ha! So Monique wasn’t here for the ball, she was tracking Picklemen. But what business would they have with Bunson’s? The crystalline valve was in their possession and under production. True, some of them had sons at the school. Where else would an evil secret society send its progeny? But to visit in person? Particularly as the boys were about to head home for the holidays.

Does Monique know why they’re here? Or is she following them because she doesn’t? Sophronia found herself, much to her disgust, contemplating arranging a conversation with the dratted blonde.

The reel was coming to an end. There was no way to stay Agatha and converse further with Vieve. Throwing caution briefly to the wind, but keeping her voice hesitant, Sophronia said, “Perhaps a consultation, later this evening, Mr. Lefoux?”

“I am at your disposal.” Vieve guided her respectably off the floor.

Where to meet? Sophronia didn’t know Bunson’s well enough to get around after hours. Vieve would have to break curfew and leave the grounds. “Behind the Nib and Crinkle? An hour before dawn?”

Vieve gave her a grave look. Then a sharp nod.

“Mr. Lefoux, I shall have my Italian reticule with me.”

Vieve was suddenly more interested. “Is it still stylish?” Code for whether Bumbersnoot was in working order.

“Indeed. But I should like you to perform some modifications, if possible.”

“I shall bring my tools.” With a perfunctory bow that suggested the dance had not been up to snuff, Vieve drifted off to approach one of the newly minted debuts for the next dance. A pretty little blonde with big violet eyes looked hugely flattered at the attention of such a handsome young man.

Sophronia was about to skulk back to her corner when a voice behind her said, “That was an unexpectedly lively conversation, Miss Temminnick.”

Sophronia turned to find Professor Lefoux looming.

“Well”—she injected a tremor of fear into her voice—“we know each other, from before, you understand.”

Professor Lefoux frowned, unsure as to whether Sophronia was hinting that she knew that the professor’s niece was illegally pretending to be her nephew as a threat, or whether Sophronia was pretending to be Agatha to such an extent that she would blunder into mention of this delicate subject in public.

Nevertheless, Professor Lefoux was intent on reprimand, and Sophronia couldn’t really fault her for it. “That dance, Miss Temminnick, was too much. I expected better from you. Are we understood?”

Sophronia said, as Agatha, “Yes, Professor. I do apologize, I am afraid I forgot myself. I—” She hesitated, wondering if she should risk telling Professor Lefoux about the Picklemen. The professor was drone to Professor Braithwope, and, as such, allied with the supernatural. By rights she should be against the Picklemen. Then again, becoming a drone to a rove vampire would be excellent cover. She had, after all, worked with Professor Shrimpdittle on the contraption that failed to protect her vampire when he was flown into the aether. She could be sabotaging her own master.

Best not to tell. “Would you, by any chance, have a spare lace tuck?” Sophronia asked, hunched and meek.

Professor Lefoux, who favored high-necked dresses, even for a ball, and thus never needed a tuck, gave her a dirty look. “Certainly not. Now, go

rectify yours having slipped. The necessities room is that way."

Sophronia bobbed a perfectly executed slightly bad curtsy—which caused her teacher to snort and say something about this kind of assignment encouraging regressive behavior—and went in the direction indicated.

She spotted Dimity holding court near the punch bowl, surrounded by admiring young men. Dimity said something, no doubt cutting, and the boys around her laughed. They were mostly Pistons, a Bunson's club known for churning out new Picklemen. At a school for evil geniuses, these were the most evil and the least genius. Pillover waltzed by and gave his sister a disgusted glare. The Pistons had made his first year at Bunson's miserable. His attention returned to his partner. A lively Agatha looked up adoringly into his face. Pillover's expression went soft—still glum and morose, but certainly soft.

The dance ended and Sophronia sent a longing look at all the happy flirting, hoping Professor Lefoux saw. She paused to watch Pillover lead Agatha off the floor. He pressed a tiny parcel into her hands. Agatha colored, looking as self-conscious as normal. Then she faked a laugh and tucked the gift down her cleavage in a flirt so blatant Pillover looked as if he might faint.

Lady Linette caught the maneuver and moved purposefully in Agatha's direction. Whether intent on praise or reprimand, it was difficult to predict. Sophronia, mindful that Professor Lefoux's eyes were glaring, could not linger. She made her way out into the hallway.

Felix did not try to speak to her again. Vieve contented herself torturing the debuts. Monique didn't stay much longer, and Sophronia wasn't blessed with the opportunity to engage her in conversation. Pillover danced with Agatha twice, much to Agatha's pleasure. And possibly to Pillover's as well. Hard to tell with Pillover—he had an almost spylike ability to maintain a sulky expression.

Such a public preference for Agatha, however, afforded Sophronia the ideal excuse to cry off her engagement with Pillover. Which she did, by letter to both him and her own mother, as soon as possible. The missive was prettily penned and very civil, stating only that she felt—given his two

dances and provision of a bosom-worthy gift to another young lady—that they were no longer suited. He was young, she forgave him his transgressions, and hoped he would accord her the courtesy of never renewing his addresses. She could only suppose that Pillover's delight upon reading her note would balance out her mother's misery.

The gift he'd given Agatha turned out to be a Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification. "Don't you think it kind of Mr. Pillover?" Agatha was disposed to be chatty after her euphoric all-conquering ball. "Did you know he's reached Nefarious Genius? He's developed the technique of having most everything he makes explode upon contact. The Pistons have stopped bothering him. Lord Dingleproops nearly lost an eye to Pill's exploding hair tonic applicator. Pillover is ever so proud."

"His hair did look nice," said Sophronia.

The girls were preparing for bed. If *preparing for bed* could be characterized by lounging about in nightgowns, caps, and robes, sipping tisanes and gossiping.

Even Preshea had joined them, in a rare moment of camaraderie. "Sophronia, I must say, being you was unexpectedly fun, for someone who never says what she actually thinks."

"Difficult to hold back on the barbs, was it?" asked Dimity, in an indisputably barblike manner. Her Preshea characteristics seemed to be taking a while to wear off.

Preshea noticed. "Clearly you enjoyed being me."

"Somewhat. It was frankly exhausting to insult everyone all the time. And hard never knowing one's real friends."

"Now, Dimity, don't be rude." Preshea's smile was glassy with contempt. "Who needs real friends?"

Sophronia was struck with a sudden pang. Was Preshea's nastiness a front? They had never given her a chance, as she'd allied with Monique from the start. After Monique left, Preshea had organically assumed the position of cruelest pretty girl. But there was something wistful in her tone. Perhaps it was only a lingering bit of Sophronia. No one ever doubted that Sophronia valued her friends above all things.

Lady Linette was prone to saying that if Sophronia had any major weakness, it was her unswerving loyalty. To which Sophronia always responded that she intended to prove that was a strength.

Preshea couldn’t tolerate even a moment of sympathetic expressions. “Oh, stop it, all of you.” She stood. “As if I should trade my status and standing for the likes of you.”

Just like that, they were back on familiar ground.

“I, for one, do not want to be scolded into bed by Professor Lefoux. Good night.” With which Preshea left. As older students, they had been moved into more luxurious accommodations, and each had her own private room. Sometimes Sophronia missed sharing with Dimity. As she’d grown up sharing with sisters, this was her first foray into the unparalleled privilege of a solitary bedchamber. But she did have Bumbersnoot to warm her toes.

The remaining three huddled in for whispered gossip, knowing Preshea was more likely to listen at her door than actually seek her bed.

Sophronia told the other two about the Picklemen and that Monique was likely there in pursuit. “I’m only waiting until lights-out before I go back down. I’ve arranged to meet Vieve for a quick consult on Bumbersnoot. And I have a letter to post.”

Dimity worried easily. “Is he ill?”

Bumbersnoot was contentedly sitting in a corner of the parlor, nibbling a small bit of coal. Steam leaked out his carapace slowly, in a sleepy manner.

“No, but I have a theory about the crystalline valves that I want to discuss with Vieve. Also, it’s an opportunity to see if she has anything more on the Picklemen. I must say, Agatha, it is difficult being you. I mean, it’s easier to have clandestine meetings on the sidelines, but harder to exchange information during dances.”

“Well,” said Agatha, “I had a marvelous time being Dimity. Thank you.” She turned bright eyes to the object of her impersonation.

Dimity grinned. “It was a pleasure to watch you butterfly about. My brother seemed suitably intimidated.”

Agatha blushed. “Oh, do you think?”

“You like him, don’t you?” teased Dimity.

“Younger man, careful there.” Sophronia teased as well.

Agatha looked to Dimity, worried. “You don’t mind?”

“Mind? ’Course I don’t mind. You’re a great deal better than those silly chits that keep hurling themselves at him. No offense meant, Sophronia.”

Sophronia was quick to defend herself. “*That* was all Mumsy’s idea.”

Dimity continued, “Frankly, I don’t understand it. It’s not like he has much consequence. And he is a human gumboil.”

Sophronia nibbled her lip. “For once I think the ladies don’t notice his lack of consequence.”

Agatha’s hands clasped together in a maneuver they had been taught by Lady Linette, but which Sophronia suspected in Agatha’s case was instinctual. “He’s very fine to look at.”

Dimity put her hands to her ears. “Oh, dear me no, none of that. I couldn’t bear it, not after such a long evening.”

Sophronia changed the subject. “And how did you find being Preshea for a night, Dim?”

“Horribly easy. I simply said any nasty thing that came to mind, so long as it wasn’t indiscreet. Best if it cut some other girl down. I’m afraid I might have been very cruel about both of you.”

Sophronia and Agatha shrugged. That was the assignment.

“It was an interesting place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live there,” Dimity concluded. “Preshea’s personality is quite putrid. Poor thing.”

Sophronia wondered if that was part of the logic behind the assignment, that by dancing in each other’s shoes, they might develop sympathy for their fellows, as well as further their subterfuge abilities.

“Well, I enjoyed the opportunity to spend most of my evening observing.” Sophronia rested her head on Agatha’s shoulder affectionately. “You were fun to be.”

Agatha blushed in pleasure.

Any further praise she might have meted out for Agatha’s self-worth was cut off prematurely as Professor Lefoux let herself into their parlor.

“Bedtime, ladies. You know the regulations.”

The girls stood and bobbed curtsies. “Yes, Professor,” they chorused. Under her austere glare, they traipsed off to their respective beds.

Enemies in the Roses

Vieve was waiting for Sophronia behind the Nib and Crinkle as arranged. She smelled as though she had managed to persuade the proprietor to serve her a pint—and then gone swimming in it.

"Really, Vieve, ale?"

"It's the kind of thing a boy would do. I spilled most of it intentionally, caused a fuss, and got myself booted out. Now if Bunson's discovers I'm out, they have a story about where I've been."

"All that for little old me?"

Vieve winked at her. "Never say I don't care, green eyes."

Sophronia laughed. Clearly Vieve was also working on how to flirt like a boy. Following in the footsteps of Pistons, was she? "Vieve, you're turning into a rake."

"Do you really think so? Topping."

Bumbersnoot chose that moment to shoot a bit of smoke out his ears, flapping the leather in greeting. He didn't like being ignored. Sophronia had him flung over her neck and one arm for transport. He was still wearing the frilly lace reticule disguise they'd devised for the ball.

Vieve's attention was diverted. "There you are, my beautiful boy."

Much as she adored Bumbersnoot, Sophronia would never describe him as beautiful. Vieve, however, possessed an indescribable love for technology. She saw Bumbersnoot not for his dented and rusty carapace, his patchwork metal bits, or his mismatched leather ear flaps, but for the work of mechanical genius beneath all that. Inside, Bumbersnoot had a high-

grade aether-tapping miniature boiler and a steam-processing mechanism so sophisticated the rest of Europe still hadn't discovered the technology. Vieve loved him for the cranks and valves that made him move with realistic smoothness and for the cyclical protocols and punch commands that told him how and where to go. She appreciated the two ways he could swallow—into storage or into his boiler. Vieve saw Bumbersnoot for what he really was—a technological masterpiece. She'd had the care of him ever since he came into Sophronia's possession. While they both knew mechanimals were a Picklemen product, Bumbersnoot had never yet led them astray.

Vieve set the mechanimal reverently on the ground and popped him open to check his internal workings.

Sophronia let her tinker in silence. They were secluded near the pub behind some large rosebushes. A good spot, for it afforded them a decent view of Mademoiselle Geraldine's, anchored outside of town. The massive dirigible bobbed quietly. It was low to the ground, fortunately for Sophronia. She'd be able to get back on board using the sooties' rope ladder.

"Everything looks in order." Vieve drew Sophronia's attention back to Bumbersnoot. "What was it you wanted adjusted?"

Sophronia tossed Vieve a small object. It was a faceted crystal valve, almost like cut glass with metal components embedded within. It was awfully familiar looking to those who knew the style.

Vieve knew it. "One of the newest crystalline valve frequensors. Where'd you get it?"

"You heard about my train misappropriation last winter?"

"I heard you eliminated a shipload of these pretties. Terrible waste."

"Let's say one of them came into my possession. Only, this one is special."

"How so?"

"It's the one the vampires were using to track the Picklemen. Bumbersnoot and Dimity smuggled it out."

"You think it's somehow tracing the other valves?"

"The vampires would have triggered this valve to react to the activation of the new ones. Could you hook this into Bumbersnoot? I know he's only a mechanimal, so he wouldn't be able to react exactly as ordered to whatever

new protocol the Picklemen transmit. But if we could get him to do that steam whistle alarm he makes in times of crisis?”

Vieve followed her reasoning. “You want him to be the canary in the coal mine? Alert you when the Picklemen make their move?”

“I do.”

Vieve grinned. “Brilliant idea. It’s large for such a little beastie. I’ll have to install it in his storage compartment. You’ll lose half that capacity. Hooking it in so it activates his alarm, when I’m not sure…” She rubbed the side of her nose in thought, smearing it with grease. “Plus, not knowing precisely what the Picklemen intend the valve to trigger…” Vieve had a habit of leaving her sentences unfinished in times of contemplation. “Well, it’s a unique idea, I’ll give you that much.”

She looked intrigued enough to take on the assignment. That was the thing with Vieve, she wouldn’t do it if she didn’t think it a challenge. Sophronia had once asked her to construct a bladed fan. Vieve had scoffed at the very idea. “It’s already been done. Why would I bother?”

But this, this was something new and subversive.

“It’s going to take time. I’ll need to keep him with me.” Vieve stood, decided.

“Of course. How long do you need?”

Vieve frowned. “A week. Will that work?”

“Perfect timing if you can make it. The school should be back at Swiffle for the holiday break. Meet you here the night we come in? Midnight? You’ll have to keep an eye to the moor, for the airship.”

“I always do. If I don’t make the deadline, I’ll send him to the sooties while the school is in port. They’ll pass him along to you after Christmas.”

Sophronia nodded. “You aren’t going home?”

“Can’t go to my aunt, since she stays on board with Professor Braithwope, and I’ve no other family. Honestly, I like having Bunson’s to myself. No one tries to stop me using the expensive equipment. I may visit the sooties if I have time.”

“They send their regards, by the way.”

Vieve smiled wistfully. “Of course they do.” Her small face fell, dimples vanishing. “I miss Soap.”

Sophronia could feel her own face shuttering closed. “Me, too.” She quickly changed the subject. “Anything else you neglected to tell me about

the Picklemen?”

Vieve considered the question, pocketing the valve and slinging Bumbersnoot over her shoulder by his reticule strap. “Four of them. Lower down the ranks—I’d suspect merely Spicers. Younger. Saw them leaving Bunson’s, on foot, just before I did.”

Sophronia frowned. “What did they want?”

“That’s your business to find out, no? I’d best get back.”

“Thank you, Vieve.”

Vieve gave her a mocking little bow. “Pleasure is all mine, as always.”

Sophronia watched her friend stride confidently back toward Bunson’s. Then she left the seclusion of the rosebushes to shadow the goat path, rather than walk down the middle of it. Too visible from the air. As a result, she almost ran into Monique, who was standing in the dark under a holly tree, binoculars to her eyes, watching the front half of the school.

Sophronia froze, terrified that she would step on some loud twig and give herself away. She’d been intent on not being seen. She should also have been thinking about not being heard.

If Monique had heard her, she gave no sign.

Sophronia crouched down slowly, shifting so she was on the other side of the tree. She watched, trying to determine what the blonde was staring at. Sophronia never went anywhere without the standard Geraldine’s armament: sewing scissors, handkerchief, perfume, lemon, hair ribbon, and red lace doily. She also carried her own special items: hurlie, obstructor, fake mustache, tea sachet, and chatelaine, from which hung her *carnet de bal*, a Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification, and a velvet pouch containing a small pork pie. Unfortunately, this vast collection did not include binoculars. She pulled up her lens. It was better for examining details and setting things on fire, but could be peered through over distances if one had no other option.

Something was going on at the pilot’s bubble.

Sophronia squinted, wishing the moon were fuller and the mists not quite so low. Shadows, three of them, climbed toward the base of the scaffolding that held the bubble up and away from the front decks of the dirigible. Shadows wearing top hats.

Picklemen were breaking into her school! They were scaling the outside by stages, using grappling hooks not unlike Sophronia’s hurlie. They were

positioned in such a way as to be entirely out of view from the teachers' balconies. *What in all aether do they want with the pilot's bubble?* Sophronia was one of the few students who'd been inside it. It was a mess of gears, coils, valves, and cables. It contained nothing particularly worth stealing. Certainly not for the Picklemen, who were generally wealthy in all that mattered: property, technology, and consequence.

Why take such a risk? Mademoiselle Geraldine's was the nest of the enemy. It was one of the few institutions that not only knew all about the Picklemen's secret society but opposed them, and had the spy network to do so properly. Yet this was obviously a well-planned penetration. They would have had to see schematics of the airship to know that an approach from down low and in small numbers was most likely to succeed. Sophronia could not help but admire the operation.

"No proximity alarm?" Monique muttered to herself.

Sophronia was wondering the same thing. The pilot's bubble had extra protections. How had the Picklemen disabled the school's soldier mechanicals? Did they have an obstructor? They made mechanicals. She wouldn't put it past them to have the means to turn them off. She wouldn't put it past Vieve to have sold the technology to the highest bidder, either. They must be doing something, for the school remained slumbering and silent.

Then Sophronia remembered—the alarms around the bubble had been disabled. Something to do with Professor Braithwope continually setting them off. He'd had a fascination with walking the top stabilizer beam out to the bubble—or dancing along it—ever since his fall and tether snap. It was one of his more consistent symptoms of separation insanity.

Nothing for it, thought Sophronia. *I must get on board and set off the alarms myself. And quickly, before they steal whatever it is they're after.*

She broke cover and sprinted toward the ship.

Monique gasped. "What?" But whatever Monique's orders, they didn't include stopping Sophronia.

The Pickleman guard, on the other hand, was a different story.

Stupid, Sophronia. Vieve *had* said four Picklemen. Only three were climbing.

He stepped into the path, facing her, pistol drawn and very deadly.

Sophronia froze. After what had happened to Soap and Felix, she was

not particularly fond of guns. She thought them quite vulgar. However, she would wager this man didn't want to fire, as that would awaken the school.

Impasse.

"Running around the moors alone at night, little girl? That's not safe at all. That's how little girls get hurt." He wiggled his heavy gun around almost casually, although keeping it pointed at her.

Sophronia was not impressed by threats. "What are you after?"

"Currently? Stupid little girls." He moved closer.

Sophronia almost wanted him to get within striking distance. Except there was the gun to consider.

A shot fired. Loud in the silence of the late night, but it wasn't from him. Instead, the man looked startled and dropped his gun to clutch at his side with both hands. His legs buckled and he fell to his knees.

"Stupid little boys should learn to *use* guns and not wave them around." Monique walked past Sophronia to the man. She held her own small pistol steady. She put one pretty little kid boot on the man's chest and shoved him to lie back, coming to stand over him, pistol pointed at his head. She didn't even look at Sophronia.

Sophronia added, "And that stupid little girls travel in pairs." Then she sprinted past, heading for the ship. Things were changing there. The climbing Picklemen, instead of coming to their friend's rescue, were moving much faster and more frantically. A few lights were on in the front module of the ship, the red-tassel section, the area forbidden to students. That shot had woken teachers.

The hatch to the boiler room was open. A few dirty-faced imps, also known as ship's sooties, were dropping a rope ladder and gesturing at Sophronia to hurry.

She was up it in a trice.

"Miss, are you hurt?" A thin young man spoke first, offering her a hand through the hatch. Sophronia took it. No cause to be rude or churlish. She'd learned to value sooties to an extent entirely at odds with her upbringing and her training.

"Not me, Handle. But we've got another problem. Infiltration."

"I didn't hear no alarm."

"Exactly! What's the nearest well-patrolled hallway?"

Handle, so called for the size of his ears as well as the usefulness of his

actions, knew better than to ask questions of Sophronia when gunshots had been fired. He'd inherited her from his predecessor, Soap. And while not as proactively accommodating to her needs, he appreciated a system of barter that served them both admirably. Sophronia brought the sooties tea cakes as often as possible, and the sooties honored her odd hours and odder requests —when they were a low risk to themselves.

Handle had been selected as their new leader by the sooties' cat, Smokey Bones, rather than by any democratic process. Smokey Bones liked Handle best, after Soap. So when Soap left, Handle was in charge. Simple as that.

He led Sophronia over to a door she'd never noticed before at the back end of the boiler room. Since engineering was vast, this shouldn't be a surprise, but Sophronia had thought she knew all the airship's secrets by now. The door was so small she had to crawl through it.

She emerged into the hallway that ran through the sooties' sleeping quarters and from there into the kitchen and serving rooms. These last were littered with tracks designed to carry and power the many household mechanicals that ran the day-to-day lives of the students and teachers. Even late at night, with most of the steam turned down, some were around tending to laundry and the morning meal. Sophronia hadn't frequented this area before, as she spent most of her time trying to *avoid* the most trundled hallways.

Where normally Sophronia would have whipped out her obstructor and stilled any clangermaid she encountered, this time she allowed herself to be noticed.

The maid took only a few seconds to realize it was an intruder. It was an odd-looking creature, as mechanicals went—faceless, with its head gears exposed, yet it wore a pinafore protecting the front portion of its conical carapace, as though an actual human maid. This particular clangermaid carried a basket full of dirty linens.

Upon sensing Sophronia, it paused and let out a whistle of inquiry. When Sophronia did not respond, it whistled again, imperiously. Then the whistle turned into a very loud shriek, like that of a teakettle. Soon this was picked up by other mechanicals nearby and then throughout the ship. Those that had been shut down whirred to life, screaming as if awoken from some nightmare of coal shortages.

Regulations required that all the students stay wherever they were when an alarm sounded. This meant the students were trapped in their quarters while the teachers hopefully investigated and found the infiltrating Picklemen.

With most of the mechanicals zipping to defend as protection protocols dictated, the maid who'd found Sophronia approached, menacing. Mechanicals were supposed to keep an intruder trapped, if possible.

Now Sophronia brought out her obstructor. She blasted the clangermaid into silent stillness—the alarm still sounded by dozens of others—and slipped past. She dashed through the kitchen, blasting those who seemed inclined to stop her and avoiding those who had other protocols in place. Afraid that if she ran into a teacher, she would be stopped, Sophronia took to the exterior of the dirigible. It was a less direct route, but it would be faster than having to explain herself.

Sophronia shot her hurlie and swung from one balcony to the next, moving at a dangerous pace. If it hadn't been so low to the ground, even she wouldn't have risked it. The hurlie was relatively new, with fancy modifications from Vieve—smaller and stealthier, faster to emit, and with an added winch to pull taut as needed. Excellent changes, all. Should be, as Vieve had made the design alterations based on Sophronia's experience. There was also a marked dexterity to the fancy India rubber soles of Sophronia's special walking boots that only a certain cobbler on Bond Street could attest to. Add to these tools the fact that Sophronia boasted muscles on her arms that no young lady ought to have, and the airship didn't stand a chance at containing her. She increased her speed through the red-tassel section, aware that inside, the shadows rushing through the hallways were those of teachers awake and hunting.

Sophronia made it to the very front of the dirigible, hung on a protrusion, and tilted her head way back. There it was, above her—the pilot's bubble. Sort of like a crow's nest, only enclosed, it looked like two large bathtubs, one overturned on top of the other. It was held, suspended above and in front of the prow, by a set of struts and one long beam from the forward squeak deck.

The three Picklemen were better equipped than she, for they had managed to climb up the scaffolding and were now crawling over the outside of the bubble. One of them appeared to be already inside. The ship's

pilot was a mechanical comprised of a jumble of gears, levers, chains, and valves, many of which were probably valuable. Her only guess was that the Picklemen needed something for which they didn't hold the patent. Some nefarious part of their scheme to take over England.

There was nothing she could do to stop the invaders. She'd once been stuck inside the pilot's bubble precisely because of its precarious position jutting out on spindly supports into nothingness.

Where are the teachers? Distracted by something? Did the Picklemen plan for that, too?

The smallest of the three emerged, and they all began to climb down. Sophronia couldn't see if the man's satchel was bulging in any recognizable manner. She scuttled out of view, hiding behind a balcony support beam.

She peeked around in time to watch them rappel off the bubble, dropping rapidly, like spiders extending threads. She'd never done anything like this before, but someone had to do something. Not sure of her timing, she hooked her hurlie over a sturdy rail and with a deep breath kicked out off the side and swung out on an interception trajectory.

She was a little off. She didn't exactly knock into the littlest Pickleman. But she did knock off his hat, which tumbled sadly to the moor below. In their desperate grapple, she also managed to rip the satchel off his back, before swinging back toward the ship. It was all done in a weird silence, because even startled by a flying female, the three men did not yell, intent on getting away as quickly and quietly as possible. They landed on the ground below, unsnapped themselves from their ropes, and took off at breakneck speed down the goat path.

Sophronia was left, dangling, clutching a sack. At which moment, Lady Linette, Professor Lefoux, and Sister Mattie finally emerged onto the front squeak deck. Lady Linette stuck her head over the edge.

"Sophronia Temminnick? Is that you? I might have known. Get up here *this minute*, young lady."

Sophronia sighed. "It may take me more than a minute, Lady Linette."

Sophronia tried to explain what had happened, but they focused on the fact that she had been caught. They thought she was concocting a wild story to

explain triggering the alarm. They refused to believe there had been an attack. “We have people in place to warn us of such things,” dismissed Professor Lefoux. They thought she’d been off at Bunson’s *trysting* with a boy! That was the downside of training intelligencers—it was impossible to tell when they were fibbing.

Of course Sophronia couldn’t defend herself with, “I’ve been climbing around for years without triggering your infernal alarm!” That would only incriminate her further, and they’d likely confiscate her obstructor and her hurlie.

She showed them the satchel she’d managed to grab off the Pickleman.

Empty.

“How do we know it isn’t yours, young lady?” asked Professor Lefoux.

“But it’s so ugly!” objected Sophronia.

“Exactly, to throw us off.”

“This is ridiculous. Would one of you at least check the pilot’s bubble? See if anything is amiss.”

Lady Linette was firm. “We have wasted enough time on your shenanigans this evening, young lady. To bed with all of us. Tomorrow we will come up with a suitable punishment.”

Sophronia turned to a more sympathetic ear. “Sister Mattie?”

The friendliest of her teachers shook her head. “A ladybug cannot change her spots.”

Lady Linette sighed heavily. “Tomorrow night I’ll have Professor Braithwope run over and—”

“Professor Braithwope! What good could he possibly do?” Sophronia was so frustrated that she interrupted.

Lady Linette was equally frustrated. “That is *enough*, young lady. To your chambers this instant, and if I see you outside of proper hours or classrooms at all in the next week, you risk being sent down permanently! Am I understood?”

“Yes, Lady Linette,” said Sophronia.

Charting an Unsteady Course

Sophronia's punishment was a course of such rigorous training and scullery duties that she could not find the time, let alone the energy, to check the bubble. Every free moment was spent assisting Sister Mattie to repot her prize begonias, or cleaning out every vial in Professor Lefoux's lab, or decanting deadly perfumes for Lady Linette. She was constantly under such focused instruction that she was practically escorted by each teacher from one lesson to the next.

While she labored under the consequences of lack of evidence—*Oh, why was the satchel empty?*—her friends concentrated on their lessons. As older students, they were encouraged to focus on their strengths. Agatha was showing affinity for Encrypting with Flower Arrangements with Sister Mattie, which surprised everyone, including Agatha. She was doing a special study on tussie-mussies and airborne poisons, creating stunning—in all ways—nosegays. Dimity focused on Millinery and Machinations. She would never admit to decorating her own hats, but there was something to be said for the concealment possibilities inherent in a well-endowed bonnet.

The only lesson they had together anymore was weaponry with Professor Braithwope and Professor Lefoux. In the old days this would have been Captain Niall's purview, but since the werewolf teacher had left to clean up a pack mess in Scotland, the school hadn't replaced him.

Today the class was working with crossbows, much to Sophronia's relief.

After her near miss on the goat path, she had gone from indifference to

guns to outright dislike. She could not shake the memory of Felix lying bleeding from a gunshot wound, and later, Soap dying of one. Not to mention the fact that guns were loud and terribly hard on one's gloves.

Strangely, it was Preshea who put it best. "If I am going to kill someone, I should be more elegant about it. Guns seem sadly crass."

Dimity was the only one who actually liked the French-issue ebony-stock percussion muff-pistols that the school provided for student training. "They are easy to use. And all the mess is some distance away."

By which Dimity meant blood. Occasionally, she still fainted at the sight of it, but she had mainly gotten over the response after Soap went down. Now her inclination to faint was only overwhelming when blood spattered on her clothing. A sensation that Sophronia could almost understand. Dimity was developing a style that involved shooting her target and then instantly looking in a different direction. Professor Lefoux despaired of her.

For some reason, Sophronia did not feel bad about the crossbow. Possibly because it was a weapon most often applied to vampires. And while she had made her peace with the hive temporarily, she didn't trust them as far as she could throw them—not after they'd kidnapped Dimity. Truth be told, even with Sophronia's arm muscles, vampires could hurl her a great deal farther than Sophronia could hurl vampires. A great tragedy of life, no doubt.

The others noticed Bumbersnoot's absence but accepted Sophronia's excuse that he was with Vieve getting a special holiday overhaul. With extra Professor Lefoux classes, this was a relief. Sophronia spent a great deal of time making certain Bumbersnoot and Professor Lefoux never encountered one another. Even when Bumbersnoot was disguised as an unbelievably frilly reticule, Professor Lefoux was too gadget-savvy to see the sausage dog as anything but a mechanimal. Unregistered mechanimals were illegal, even groundside in regular society. Professor Lefoux would not be understanding in this matter.

With Bumbersnoot off ship, Sophronia no longer had to be constantly worried about what he might be up to. It was a relief knowing there was currently no way he could get into trouble. She wondered if that was a bit of how the teachers felt about her sometimes.

Professor Lefoux was giving them crossbow lessons on one of the midship decks. They were shooting at handkerchief targets, held in the

claws of soldier mechanicals arrayed on the inside of the deck. This allowed the bolts to go through the material and embed themselves in the pitted wall behind.

“You ladies are developing into passably good shots.” Professor Lefoux indulged in a rare moment of praise.

“We should be,” muttered Preshea. “We’ve been at it for ages.”

Preshea could hit the handkerchief well enough to knock it out of the soldier mechanical’s grip, but not to pin it against the wall. Agatha missed one out of every four shots. Dimity struggled to get the bolt loaded but after that did fine.

“Everyone, see how Miss Buss holds her bow?” Professor Lefoux instructed. “But her stance, too angled. Square up, Miss Buss.”

Agatha was staring off into space, fingering her Depraved Lens of Crispy Magnification.

Sophronia caught her at it and couldn’t resist. “I suppose that could be considered a courting gift, from an evil genius.”

Agatha dropped the lens as if it burned.

Professor Lefoux focused on them. “Miss Temminnick, if you would be so kind as to demonstrate the draw?”

Sophronia hefted her crossbow, loading the bolt and pulling back on the string. Then, without much thought, she raised her arm, pointed, and fired —hitting a dead-on bull’s-eye through the handkerchief. This was a surprise to Sophronia. If she had known she would be that good, she might have purposefully failed. It seemed to be a surprise to the soldier mechanical as well, for it puffed out smoke from beneath its neck attachment in a little stutter of shock.

“There she goes,” sniffed Preshea under her breath.

Professor Lefoux approved, as much as her personality would allow. “Adequate, Miss Temminnick. But consistency is also vital. I want both accuracy and precision. Do it again.”

Sophronia loaded, pointed, and shot, casually, hoping she would miss but not willing to do it on purpose now that the teacher was watching her closely.

“Another bull’s-eye. Have you been practicing extra hours, Miss Temminnick?”

Sophronia shook her head.

Professor Lefoux grunted. “I suppose natural talent happens. I will move you up to a more weighty draw.”

Agatha dropped her bow with a clatter while Professor Lefoux was talking to Sophronia, then bent over to pick it up, spilling cleavage everywhere willy-nilly.

“Miss Woosmoss, act like a lady!” remonstrated the professor.

Agatha modified her bend into a crouch, stays creaking.

Professor Lefoux rummaged about in an immense carpetbag with six little wheels affixed to its bottom, producing a teakettle-like object, an embroidery roll of wrenches, and a few other tools. Eventually, she found another crossbow, larger and heavier than the others. She handed it to Sophronia.

“Now, class, note how much stiffer the string is on this one? That will yield a more forceful bolt. This is more deadly and more accurate at distances. Go ahead, Miss Temminnick.”

Sophronia gave it her best effort, but it was impossible to pull back the string. It snapped forward several times, nearly taking her fingertip with it. She finally managed it by bracing against the wall with her foot and using both arms. Shooting the higher-impact crossbow was fun—the bolt flew with satisfying force and fairly tore the handkerchief in half before hitting the wall behind with a loud thunk.

“Miss Temminnick, keep with that one. Now, class, after sunset prepare for a co-lesson with Professor Braithwope, at which point we will use a moving target.”

“What target?” Preshea looked wary.

Professor Lefoux looked at her as if the answer should be self-evident. “Professor Braithwope himself, of course. He’ll hold up a large wood trencher. We’ll use metal bolts so as not to do any permanent harm should you actually hit him.”

Dimity trembled in agitation. “We have to shoot directly at a living target?”

“Not exactly living, but yes.” Professor Lefoux was remarkably unperturbed.

Sophronia felt bound to object. “I, for one, should prefer not to shoot at someone I like.”

“Admirable scruples, Miss Temminnick. Get over them, for you will do

it anyway."

"Yes, Professor." Sophronia wanted to object further. Professor Braithwope wasn't in his right mind. It didn't feel sporting to shoot at a crazy person, even if that person was a vampire who'd agreed to the job. Then again, mental fragility might make him unpredictable and harder to hit. Still, Sophronia would hate to add crossbow injury to her long list of transgressions against a teacher who, in the end, was nothing more offensive than undead with excellent taste in clothing and a curiously unstable mustache.

"I suppose she'd know if it weren't a good idea." Agatha was obliquely referring to the fact that Professor Lefoux, as the vampire's drone, was responsible for his well-being. She *was* his food source.

They continued the crossbow lesson until sunset, at which point they were allowed a short rest. It was one of those rare clear nights on the moor—a midwinter rain had washed the mist away. Soon the fog would be back. It was like table settings. The skies of Dartmoor were perpetually set for visitors, rarely bare of decoration.

The girls, tired from their physical exertions, leaned against the rails and watched the sun sink over the upland heath, gossiping quietly. There was some argument over an article in last week's popular papers, retrieved for analysis by the teachers in Swiffle-on-Exe. Gossip columns were a vital part of training, as one had to read between the lines not only to understand the way society worked but also to puzzle out aristocratic machinations, determine the bias in the press, and look for encoded missives within the back promotionals. An advertisement for muffs was getting a great deal of attention. A few girls were contemplating essays on the subject. Sophronia thought it was simply an advertisement, but others believed there was an embedded message concerning Scandinavian infiltration into northern Scotland. Something about the muffs' looking more like the hats favored by the Danish guard. Add to that the fact that the Scandinavians had been keeping an awful lot to themselves recently, and many were left wondering if they could be trusted. Pickled herring was, in the end, a hugely suspicious food.

Professor Braithwope joined them after sunset. He was dressed quite somberly, his dark burgundy cravat tied neatly in the waterfall style, his waistcoat, jacket, and trousers all charcoal gray. His eccentricity of mind

sometimes reverberated in his attire, causing him to wear odd items like a stovepipe beaver hat or a satin cape, but he never wore them badly. He might have lost his mind, but never his fashion sense. Tonight, however, he looked more undertaker than vampire.

The girls were tentative about the assignment, but it became clear that Professor Braithwope, while batty enough to insist on dancing an Irish fling the entire time, still had all his reflexes in working order. It was impossible to shoot him. He either dodged or intercepted the dart with his wooden trencher.

“Do you see? Not so easy to kill a vampire, is it?” Professor Lefoux sounded smug.

Sophronia wondered if the vampire had noticed anything different about the pilot’s bubble recently. She decided to try to converse with him. She hoped Professor Lefoux would see this as an attempted diversion tactic for getting in a shot.

“Professor Braithwope, have you seen anything interesting dancing ’round the school recently?”

“Condiments are scarce in the skies, whot.” The vampire was serious on this subject.

“Not so much as you would think,” Sophronia contradicted, wondering if he was aware enough to actually be referring to the Pickleman break-in. “Lost your mustard powder, have you?” She loaded in a bolt, taking her time.

“No, relish.” The vampire twirled away. Preshea’s shot went wide.

“Thought as much,” said Sophronia.

The vampire’s eyes focused on her. “Why would I have lost anything? Not all wandering mechanicals are lost. Besides, often you’re left with a hold full of pets, whot.” He said this as though offering a special tidbit of information.

Sophronia took it as such. “I’ll keep that in mind, Professor.”

“Sooner your mind than mine, little miss. Mine seems to be full of holes, like a tea strainer.”

Professor Lefoux interrupted. “I don’t think your tactic is working, Miss Temminnick. Take your shot or try something else.”

“How about a variation on the fan and sprinkle?”

“For a vampire?” Professor Lefoux was skeptical, for that was a

werewolf manipulation.

Sophronia produced a cream puff from within the confines of her pagoda sleeve. She broke it open to reveal the white filling. With her left hand she tossed this at the professor's immaculate trouser leg. Occupied as he was, fending off crossbow bolts, he did not expect an attack of low-flying stickiness.

With a cry of distress, he registered the smear of cream on his shiny shoe.

When he bent to examine the carnage, Sophronia shot.

She was still not fast enough.

He got the trencher up and caught her bolt at its center with one hand while his other was occupied extracting a handkerchief to repair the damage.

It was Sophronia's last bolt. But she followed her shot with a charge, whipping out her bladed fan into an arc of deadly metal, the leather guard off and fallen to the deck.

She had it in and against the vampire's neck before he could straighten upright.

He let her, surprised.

Professor Lefoux tutted. "Did I say other weapons were allowable? Besides, what good is that fan? It's not wood."

Sophronia snapped the fan closed and backed off. "I wanted to see if I could get that close."

Professor Braithwope gave her a funny look. Well, funnier than usual. "You know, pretty little miss, you could have simply offered me your *carnet de bal*. I would be delighted to dance with you."

"Oh, really, Sophronia, now you're in the way of everyone else," Professor Lefoux reprimanded her.

Sophronia turned to return to the line, but the vampire caught her hard about the waist and dragged her close.

Sophronia swallowed suddenly, frightened. Professor Braithwope's eyes, absent of intelligence, followed the movement of the muscles in her throat.

Why didn't I wear a high-necked gown?

"Sophronia." Professor Lefoux's voice was soft but firm. "Cover your neck and back away slowly."

Sophronia could wriggle enough to bring her fan up and flick it open in

front of her bare throat, but the vampire's arm about her waist was like iron. She could not shift it, and she certainly could not back away.

"Don't you want to dance, little one?" Professor Braithwope's voice was a seductive rumble. His funny little mustache, always one to lead the charge, looked menacingly fluffy. It was like a cat with its back arched and its fur bristling. Below the bristle, Sophronia could see the points of fangs sticking out of his mouth.

"Your neck is very white," complimented the vampire.

"Thank you." Sophronia was pleased her voice didn't shake. "I've worked hard over the years with lemon and buttermilk under Mademoiselle Geraldine's guidance. I started out with freckles, you know?"

"I've always been fond of freckles." Professor Braithwope leaned in. "Little spots of delicious seasoning, whot."

Then Professor Lefoux was there, crowding in on them. She stuck her arm right in front of the vampire's face. She had nicked her wrist slightly, probably on a crossbow bolt.

The arm around Sophronia's waist slackened.

She spun out and dashed away, shaken.

Dimity hugged her with one arm. "You all right?"

Sophronia nodded.

Agatha's eyes were huge with concern and she patted Sophronia's shoulder in awkward sympathy.

Preshea muttered, "They ought not let him stay on board. He's not safe. This is a *school*, for goodness' sake!"

Sophronia jumped to the vampire's defense, surprising everyone. "You think the outside world is so very safe?"

"You say that, after nearly being bitten?" Preshea was shocked.

"It's happened before and it will happen again." Sophronia reached for calm. Part of the training. Only Dimity could feel her shiver.

They watched—crossbows slack at their sides, resting among the folds of wide skirts—as Professor Braithwope sucked at Professor Lefoux's wrist. It was oddly intimate and embarrassing and disgusting.

Sophronia looked away, busying herself by holstering her fan.

Dimity allowed herself to be shrugged off. "Sophronia?"

"I'm perfectly spiffy, thank you." Sophronia's voice was steady, though her brain kept reliving her brush with fang. She forced herself to analyze

the encounter as Lady Linette instructed. *After every unladylike action, there must be an equal and opposite reaction. Consider the necessary, analyze the consequences, clean up the mess.*

Sophronia thought about the vampire's movements and the strength in that arm encircling her waist. Professor Braithwope's reflexes were good enough for the crossbow, but they weren't what they once were. And he seemed only able to focus on one task at a time.

She moved away from the others, pretending to hunt for new bolts but really trying to control a sudden pang. Fear. Guilt. Grief. The vampire's condition was deteriorating. It wasn't only his self-control—it was his supernatural abilities as well. She had hoped a vampire could recover from tether snap. That if he stayed within his home territory of the airship, his tether would reestablish, and he would find his full wits once more. It seemed, instead, that he was getting worse. *How did I miss that until now? How much have the other teachers been working to hide his condition?*

She stared at Professor Lefoux, who was bandaging her wrist and leading the vampire away from the students. She looked tired and older than before.

Will he become even more dangerous? After all, werewolves went mad at full moon. What might happen to a vampire who was losing his mind? Preshea was correct, for even Geraldine's girls weren't equipped to deal with *that*. The debuts, for example, were at risk. She hoped the teachers were locking the vampire down after the students went to bed.

After his snack and a brief rest to digest, the vampire seemed able to continue the lesson. By the end of two hours the girls had sore arms and fingertips and were eager for supper. The incident seemed to have been largely forgotten as simply another one of Sophronia's pranks—except by Sophronia.

They changed and then had a half hour for contemplation. Sophronia spent it staring glumly out the porthole window. Agatha spent it in indecision over jewelry. Dimity read a novel of some woefully romantic persuasion.

Finally Sophronia shook off her mood. "How's the book?"

As much as she was enjoying it, Dimity would always rather talk about reading than actually read. In fact, Sophronia suspected she only read enough to have something to discuss. "Oh, it's *very good*. I've just got to

the bit where the vampire has taken the heroine to his town house and we don't know if his intentions are honorable or dastardly."

Agatha gasped. She'd been getting an annotated commentary on said novel for the past week. "Oh, really? Does he want to suck her blood?"

"Far worse. He wants to give her a makeover." Dimity fiddled with the mother-of-pearl buttons up the front of her peach brocade dinner dress. She didn't want Agatha to see how excited she was to relay more.

Agatha squeaked in titillated horror. "A *full* makeover?"

Sophronia snorted. She thought the novel very silly.

They arrived back in Swiffle-on-Exe mid-December. As usual, they came in over the river, took on water in the wee hours, and circled back to rest near the goat path. Parents would send carriages for their girls the next morning. The young ladies were happily occupied well past bedtime, packing and giggling and exchanging gifts with friends before parting ways.

Winter holidays were the longest offered by Mademoiselle Geraldine's. The young ladies were let out earlier than most because they had so little contact with the outside world the rest of the year. One could not order in Christmas gifts when one was drifting idly over the moors. Shopping must be accounted for. So Mademoiselle Geraldine's girls had an early pickup well before Christmas. They returned shortly after, as Geraldine's girls traditionally spent New Year's together. Something about making certain the New Year came in deadly and stylish.

Sophronia left her fellows to the tribulation of fitting everything into hatboxes and portmanteaus. Dimity was trying to decide which of her sparkles to pack and which she might reliably expect to be replaced by the *real thing* this Christmas. Poor girl. She was doomed to disappointment. Her parents had made some improvement to the family's circumstances by selling the crystalline valve, but not enough to afford sapphires. And Dimity adored sapphires. And rubies. And emeralds. And… not diamonds.

"But they sparkle," Sophronia protested.

"They aren't colorful enough," Dimity explained. "All that white is so flashy, don't you feel?"

"Until this very moment, I didn't think you found *anything* flashy."

“Really, Sophronia, credit me with some taste!”

Agatha was mooning, purposeless, not bothering to pack. Much as she disliked school, it was better than home.

Sophronia, for her part, never wasted too much time preparing for travel. As Preshea said, it wasn’t as if she had much to take with her. Instead, she drifted out of the door and into the hallway, unnoticed. It was after curfew, but Sophronia so rarely kept to legitimate hours that even her enemies didn’t bother to rat her out. For all they knew, she was under orders from one of the teachers. There were even a few, Preshea included, who accused Sophronia of taking over Monique’s duties as Professor Braithwope’s second drone.

“That’s why he went for her during crossbow training,” Preshea explained to her new friend Frenetta.

Sophronia allowed the rumors. It was as good a front as any, that she would entertain vampire patronage. No one need know she had already struck a deal with the werewolves. She had bargained her freedom to the dewan for Soap’s survival, and she considered it a fair deal. At least, right now she did. She had no idea what the dewan would want once he got her under his command. But in the end, wolves were better than vampires—or she hoped they were.

In the interim, if her late-night peregrinations were perceived by her fellow students as part of some bloody agreement, she was not one to gainsay gossip that stood her reputation in good stead. Especially not gossip that stopped others from interfering.

Vieve was waiting at their prescribed location behind the rosebushes, once again smelling strongly of cheap ale.

“You’re going to get a reputation as a swill tub tosspot.”

“Good.” Vieve also liked to be underestimated because of a perceived reputation. She handed over Bumbersnoot.

He looked the same as ever, if perhaps a bit shinier and free of rust. He tooted smoke at Sophronia, his little tail tick-tocking back and forth in cheery greeting.

“How did the installation go?”

“Difficult to tell, as there is no way to test ahead of time. We have to wait for the Picklemen to make their move, and only then will we know if the crystalline valve–linked alarm trigger works. If they activate their command for all the mechanicals to do something, Bumbersnoot should squeal like an abused hand brake. But I’m only saying *should*.”

“Not the best situation to be in. My life could depend on this alarm going off.”

Vieve raised an eyebrow. “Could it? Well, I suggest you arrange things so that particular scenario doesn’t occur.”

“You have an overabundance of faith in my abilities.”

“As you have in mine.”

They shared a smile.

“Will I see you at the New Year’s tea?” Sophronia wondered.

“Are we engaging in more interschool fraternization so soon?” Vieve was good at acting the part of absentminded boffin. They both knew she was perfectly well aware of the party.

“That’s the gossip.” Sophronia played along.

“I thought the teachers were at odds.”

“That seems to be reason enough for another gathering.”

“It’s so much more fun for everyone if a school rivalry is committed close up and in fancy dress?” suggested the younger girl.

“Exactly,” agreed Sophronia.

“Well, at least the food will be better. I tell you, Sophronia, if there’s anything rotten about being a boy, it’s the food. They expect us not to have any kind of discerning palate. The swill they give us to eat ought to be considered unlawful child endangerment.” Vieve sounded particularly French in her disgruntlement.

“I’m sure it’s nourishing to the noggin.”

“One wishes the tongue were also under consideration. I do miss tea at Geraldine’s.” Vieve sighed. “Will this party have crumpets? I’d kill for a proper crumpet.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to kill anyone, although you never know.” It was best not to use that particular figure of speech around Geraldine’s girls, Sophronia always thought. “Can’t you invent a crumpet emitter or something?”

“Cooking gadgets never work properly.” Vieve looked sad. “Try to kill

someone or take over the world and boffins are all for it, but baking a cake is a more serious business. Must be left up to proper pastry chefs, I'm afraid. Cooks are always human, never mechanical. And Bunson's cooks are several puffs short of the pastry."

Sophronia nodded, adjusting Bumbersnoot to lie crosswise over her back, the better to climb. He tooted at her and shed a bit of ash down the side of her dress. "Bumbersnoot!" she reprimanded.

"Oh, yes," Vieve was unperturbed by this rude behavior. "I'm afraid he'll be doing that more frequently. Diminished storage capacity. I had to make room for the new valve. I did warn you the results could get messy."

"No, you didn't."

"I didn't? Well, you should take that as fact with anything you ask me to modify. My own inventions, from design to execution, are intended to be compact and elegant, but messing about with other people's inevitably has untidy consequences."

"Noted. Very well. I forgive you, Bumbersnoot." The metal creature looked neither chastised by the reprimand nor excited by the reprieve. In the end, sometimes he was simply a mechanical sausage dog.

Vieve said, "Before you go, could I give you a present for my aunt? I don't think we can arrange time to see one another secretly over the holidays. It's best if we don't remind people we are related. Gaspar Lefoux is supposed to be an *estranged* nephew."

She produced a massive box from the shadows of the rosebush. It was quite wide enough for several Bumbersnoots to fit inside.

"Um?" Sophronia hesitated. *How am I supposed to get around the ship carrying that?*

"I put on straps, see, here and here? You can wear it across your back like a lute. Bumbersnoot will dangle below."

Sophronia took it, glad that at least it didn't weigh much. "What on earth is it?"

With a wide grin, Vieve unstrapped the gift, which proved to be some kind of hatbox, and popped off the lid. Inside was, not unexpectedly, a hat.

Now, it ought to be pointed out, at this juncture, that the lighting wasn't good behind the Nib and Crinkle, among the rosebushes, near the goat path. The moon was not full. The fog was low. And yet there was no doubt about its appearance.

“Vieve, that is an inordinately ugly hat.” Sophronia would call Professor Lefoux many things, and not a one of them was *leader of fashion*, but her taste certainly wasn’t *that* bad.

Vieve seemed to know her own aunt less well than Sophronia. “Isn’t it hideous? Do you think she’ll like it?”

Sophronia quirked an eyebrow.

“Oh. Of course. Only see what it does.” Vieve carefully removed the hat from its box. It was a massive sunshade style made of deep midnight-blue satin, instead of straw. The wide brim was sprinkled with small bits of glass, in a simulation of stars. Upon closer inspection, the sparkling dots were in the formation of several popular constellations. The very top of the hat’s crown was painted yellow, obviously indicating the sun, with rays extending down over the side toward the brim. This alone would have made it one of the most curious hats that Sophronia had ever seen, but that was merely the foundation. Vieve had constructed a miniature winch device, like those employed by music boxes, dangling near one ear, that when wound up and released caused seven planets to orbit about the hat. These were on long wires of different lengths, anchored to rails at the brim, sticking up to revolve about in patterns simulating the solar system. Each planet was colored according to the latest scientific evidence: Venus being pale blue because of all the turquoise deposits, the Earth green for the lush landscapes, Jupiter orange for its iron-rich sands, and so forth. There was a dangling feather ball off the back on a particularly long wire—a comet? Stuck to the midnight blue were a few sporadic small puffs of down.

“What are those?”

Vieve glowed. “Recent pamphlets suggest there’s a kind of cosmic mist, no name as yet, but I thought my aunt would appreciate the homage to modern astronomical theory.”

Sophronia was impressed with the artistry and the execution, if not with the resulting style statement. Since Vieve’s shining eyes clearly indicated an expectation of some form of praise, Sophronia said the nicest thing she could think of without lying. “It’s very well made.”

“Do you think my aunt will like it?”

“Does she have anything to go with it?” Sophronia was cautious.

Vieve laughed. “Crikey, no. I do know something about fashionable headgear. No, no. I don’t expect her to *wear* the wretched thing! It’s a bit of

a family joke.”

Sophronia relaxed. “Oh, well, in that case, I think it’s wonderful.”

Vieve’s dimples became more pronounced. She resettled the solar hat into its box and took great pains when strapping it to Sophronia’s back.

“Well, my dear Vieve, amazing work as always. Someday you must allow me to repay you for all you’ve done.”

“Sophronia, *ma mie*, I’m counting on it.” The girl doffed her hat and strode back toward Bunson’s, hands thrust deep into her pockets, whistling an off-key tune under her breath.

Sisters and Their Consequences

"What will I do if they've forgotten about me?" Sophronia, Dimity, and Agatha were inside the main teahouse in Swiffle-on-Exe, waiting for retrieval over pudding. Pickups took most of the day, and the school had long since disappeared.

"Enjoy the blessed freedom of a Christmas without family?" suggested Agatha.

"I don't know about that. Some of them aren't all *that* bad. I quite like Ephraim's wife." Having not seen them in a while, Sophronia was disposed to be magnanimous about her siblings.

"You could come back with me," suggested Dimity.

"Your parents wouldn't mind?" Sophronia brightened at the idea. Someone else's family holiday traditions are always so much more exciting than one's own.

"Hardly. They know a little about you rescuing Pill and me from the hive. They're more likely to be embarrassingly gracious. There might even have been some correspondence between our mothers on your brilliance and the excellent nature of our friendship."

"Goodness, your mother didn't say anything to mine about our *real* education, did she?"

"Certainly not. She'd never reveal Mademoiselle Geraldine's secrets. Mamma takes subterfuge seriously."

Sophronia relaxed. "Good. And they know to pick you up here?"

"Standard practice, since Geraldine's always has an early holiday let-

out.”

“What about your brother?” asked Agatha, trying to seem disinterested.

“Unspeakable worm. What about him?”

“Is he meeting here as well?”

“No. Bunson’s isn’t out for another week. Mummy always grumbles about having to arrange travel twice. Although not this time, thanks to you.” Dimity flung a companionable arm around Agatha’s shoulders. Agatha hid a grin at the affection by nibbling pudding.

Since her home was only slightly off the route to London, Dimity was to ride with Agatha. Agatha liked the companionship, and Dimity no longer enjoyed trains. Soap crashing a locomotive into a dirigible and subsequent events had given her train-related nightmares.

The girls were in the window seat of the teahouse, which had an excellent view of the meeting square. Agatha’s near-limitless expense account was always good for the best seat at any watering hole. They watched their fellow students being retrieved and gossiped about each. Unfortunately, the pudding was alcoholic enough to appeal only to Bumbersnoot, who always showed interest in things that could catch on fire. The little dog sat on the bench next to Sophronia, under cover of the pouf of her traveling gown’s teal skirts, and ate whatever she fed him with gusto.

All speculation proved moot at that point, for a carriage pulled up intended for Sophronia. Of course they did not know this until the owner of said carriage emerged.

Her sister looked slightly stouter, but otherwise unchanged. As Petunia stepped down, no one could doubt she was related to Sophronia—same oval face and muddy green eyes. Petunia’s hair was a shade darker and her cheeks rounder, both tinted slightly red by art and science. Her curls were set by a French maid, while Sophronia’s were the product of Dimity and madly wielded hair-rags. But the sisters shared the same straight nose and firm mouth, and were of a height.

Sophronia exchanged startled looks with her friends. “Well, I never!”

She immediately gathered up Bumbersnoot, for it would not do to keep *Petunia* waiting. She collected her luggage from the cloakroom, leaving Agatha and Dimity to see to the last of the tea.

Petunia stood looking around at the quaint town with ill-disguised

hauteur. Her traveling dress, fur muff, well-trimmed bonnet, and velvet gloves screamed *London*.

"Petunia? I say, this is a surprise." Sophronia plopped down her carpetbag to give her sister a polite peck on the cheek.

"Sophronia, still carting around that horrid Italian dog reticule, I see." Petunia's hat had ostrich *and* peacock feathers—for travel! Even more shocking—her sister was actually smiling.

"It has sentimental value. But Petunia, what on earth are you doing here?"

"You may well ask. Middle of nowhere. I understand why Mumsy sent you to finishing school, really I do, but why not France or Switzerland? Why Devon?"

"Expense, I suppose."

Petunia shook her curls and tut-tutted at open mention of pecuniary matters, even among sisters. She had married well and after only one season. It was a match so advantageous, she herself could hardly believe it. True, Mr. Hisselpenny wasn't as blue-blooded as Petunia would have liked, but he was well set up in town. From what Sophronia could gather, Petunia had proceeded to spend most of her husband's fortune attempting to break into the upper crust, with limited success. Her doting husband catered to her every whim, including, evidently, a coach and four.

"It has done you good, I will say that." Petunia issued a rare compliment, looking Sophronia over with an eye to her appearance and posture, as if Petunia were decades her senior.

"Thank you very kindly." Sophronia resisted the urge to bristle. Petunia was one of those who responded better to cordial than to barley water. "I do value your good opinion, sister."

Petunia looked smug. "Is that all you have?"

Sophronia's baggage included only one valise and two hatboxes. And Bumbersnoot, of course. "Afraid so. Mumsy doesn't send me many dresses anymore. Since you married, there have been none to hand down. Everything I have is worn and not worth packing."

Petunia's eyes lit up. "Exactly what I suspected! This is why I volunteered to collect you. You are, after all, soon to come out, and as I am now residing in town, I decided to see you properly outfitted. And I know you would like to do your Christmas shopping in London, for once."

Ah-ha, thought Sophronia. *Having spent as much as she dared on herself, and becoming bored with society, Petunia wants me for her new entertainment.* Sophronia grimaced at being thought a doll, but she could not deny a thrill of excitement. Who didn't want to go to London for the shopping? Of course, her eagerness had nothing, whatsoever, to do with the fact that Soap was currently living in London. *Nothing at all.*

Petunia took Sophronia's thoughtful silence as dissent. "You don't want to? Oh, why must you be such a bore?"

Where, in the past, Sophronia would have snarled in response, instead she applied praise. "Of course not, sister dear. It's a delightful notion. And so kind of you to concoct it. I'm a little surprised, that is all. But I'm certainly not one to look a gift London in the mouth." *Even if it comes packaged with a meddling sister.* Sophronia and Petunia had never been close, but Petunia appreciated the airs and graces finishing school had given her, and Sophronia was willing to put those airs and graces to the test in tolerating Petunia.

Petunia grinned—actually grinned!—and even blushed a little. "Well, no need to babble on. There's more for you still to come."

"Indeed?"

Agatha and Dimity trotted up at that juncture.

Petunia turned to them. "Which one of you is Miss Woosmoss?"

Agatha curtsied politely. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Hisselpenny."

"Ah, yes. Well, my husband and your father are business associates, and as I was coming down to collect Sophronia, he suggested I bring you and your little companion—Dimity, is it?—along. We shall make a merry party of it all the way to London."

Agatha and Dimity made delighted noises, and Petunia glowed at being thought the magnanimous benefactress. *How is it I never knew that all she wanted was to be a gracious hostess?* Sophronia was curious as to whether these were changes in her sister, or in her own perception of her sister. But Petunia did seem to genuinely enjoy herself—ordering about the coachman and ensuring the safety of the luggage as it was lifted up top.

"Now, who prefers facing? Miss Woosmoss?" Petunia had obviously been instructed by her husband to be particularly *nice* to Agatha. However, none of Geraldine's girls were so foolish as to antagonize without purpose.

If Petunia wanted to make a fuss over Agatha, they were happy to let her.

“Why, Mrs. Hisselpenny, what a lovely carriage. So well padded.” It was only adults and boys who threw Agatha off. Petunia, Agatha could manage.

“Did you notice the foot warmers? My dear Mr. Hisselpenny is too good to me,” gushed Petunia.

Dimity hopped in next. “Lovely.”

“Thank you.” Petunia had not yet grown so accustomed to luxury that it failed to improve her goodwill, particularly when seated in the lap of it.

It was an uneventful journey. Sophronia stuck to a policy of saying the third nice thing that came into her head, rather than the first snappish one. Agatha was pleasantly warmhearted, as only Agatha could be in the face of abject frivolity. And Dimity and Petunia filled up the space in between with chatter so unending as to make them fast friends by the end of an hour, and bosom companions in the most superficial way by the end of the first day’s drive.

Petunia’s new magnanimous nature saw them set up in the best suite of rooms at the inn and dining in rustic splendor on mock turtle soup, roast sirloin of beef with horseradish, Brussels sprouts, cabinet pudding, and Stilton cheese with celery and pulled bread.

Petunia seemed inclined to eat mainly her vegetables, turning quite green at the smell of the Stilton. This surprised Sophronia into asking if her husband belonged to a religious sect to which Petunia had converted. Why else give up cheese?

“Dear me, no.” Petunia lowered her voice, even though they had a private dining room. “I am increasing.”

That, of course, caused much squealing. For although unmarried ladies were not to know of such things, Geraldine’s girls had some training from Sister Mattie on the subject of preventative measures. After all, children were very incommodious when practicing espionage. This, Sophronia realized, opened up the perfect topic of conversation for the remainder of their journey to London. Because, of course, it had been decided that both Agatha and Dimity must, simply *must*, also come to town. Well, Agatha lived there, but Dimity *must* stay with Sophronia and the Hisselpennys. For they *must* all shop together.

Dimity sent a letter to her parents from the inn, convinced that they would welcome the opportunity to punt her off to London. Sophronia made

certain to confirm this in private.

“They’re in the middle of a new invention. Plus, they never know what to do when only one of us is home. When it’s me and Pillover, they insist we can entertain each other. Sometimes I think that’s why they had two of us. Poor Pillover—as a baby it meant a lot of dress-up. Thank goodness I was older. Can you imagine what he might have done to me, if I were the younger? Doesn’t bear contemplating.”

“Capital. I really am looking forward to it. And Petunia doesn’t realize we’ve been learning more than simply etiquette.” Sophronia gave her best evil smile.

Dimity giggled. “Which speaks well of either your talent or her willingness to be deceived.”

“Is that a compliment?”

Agatha shook her red curls. “You should take it as one, Sophronia. Remember what Lady Linette says about compliments?”

“They are better than jewelry when hung about a girl.”

Dimity was suspicious. “Which I’ve never quite believed, but if it’s what you’ve got, take it.”

Petunia’s house was lovely, if not as grand as Agatha’s. It boasted two mechanicals, buttlinger and clangermaid, as well as a man-of-all-work and a cook. Dimity and Sophronia had to share a room, because the other was being converted to a nursery, but they had done so before and enjoyed the return to form.

Petunia was inconvenienced most mornings and occasionally of an evening, which was enough separation for Sophronia to find her society bearable. The rest of the time Petunia was vested in paying calls and shopping as much as possible before her condition became apparent and she was forced into confinement.

Sophronia left Bumbersnoot behind on most jaunts because of her sister’s evident dislike of the unfashionable accessory. No doubt he spent his time hunting stray bits of string and the occasional dust bunny, depositing in his turn small piles of ash in one corner of the room. Luckily for Sophronia, who had to clean it up, he always chose the same corner.

Dimity was so enamored of the shops they visited that Petunia turned an increasingly fond eye to her. Sophronia would never have thought her friend and her sister could grow close, but already Dimity had a standing invitation to return for another visit, with or without Sophronia.

“Would you look at those gloves? Have you ever seen anything so pretty? And the leather, it’s like butter.” Dimity was in ecstasies.

“Oh my, yes, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, they are indeed *divine*. Do you think they could be made up to match Sophronia’s new walking dress? Oh, Mr. Pilldorff? Mr. Pilldorff, these exquisite little gloves, in mauve, do you think?”

Sophronia nipped in to throw a spanner in the works simply because she could. “Did you see the lace ones, sister dear? Did you ever imagine such a thing as *lace* gloves?”

Petunia’s head snapped up, not unlike that of an excited squirrel. “Lace? Did you say *lace* gloves? Surely, you jest, sister.”

Sophronia rarely jested without purpose. She pointed mutely.

Petunia and Dimity scuttled off to the other display, followed by the obsequious Mr. Pilldorff.

Agatha sidled up to Sophronia. “What are you up to?”

Sophronia wasn’t interested in gloves. In her line of work, their detrimental effect on dexterity left her mainly engaged in constant removal of said accessory. Although the reinforced leather tradesman style were invaluable for climbing ropes. “Causing a ruckus for my own amusement.”

“They hardly need your assistance.”

“True. My poor brother-in-law. Although he doesn’t seem to mind much.”

Sophronia, after a few days’ confined acquaintance, was growing to like Mr. Hisselpenny. He was a gentleman of middling years with an ungentlemanly interest in investment banking and an unreasonable urge to spend most of his capital on his silly wife. Petunia could not have designed herself a more amiable husband. One could easily overlook the bushy eyebrows. Theirs was a match made in consumerism and pecuniary advancement. He liked the pecuniary aspect, and Petunia liked to consume.

Sophronia and Agatha drifted to the back of the shop.

“You’re doing well out of it.” Agatha gestured to the stack of packages they’d acquired on this one trip alone.

“I do need new things.” Petunia had decent taste, and they had the same coloring, so Sophronia was tolerably confident in her selections. Occasionally, she voiced a preference for extra pockets or a stronger belt, practical choices that Petunia took into account, thank goodness, because the rest of the time Sophronia let her decide. As a result, their sisterly relationship had only improved. “I’m not complaining, even if it is all in pursuit of an advantageously blue-blooded match.”

Agatha smiled. “She married for money, so she thinks you should marry for rank?”

“She saw me with Lord Mersey. For herself she wanted a husband who dotes, but for me…? I think she believes her new money plus my training at a finishing school can advance us both socially. Which sets up her progeny for improvement by association. That is, if she does not spend all her husband’s funds on gloves first.”

Agatha was somewhat upset by this assessment. “I believe she actually enjoys spending time with you.”

Sophronia was startled. “You think that likely?”

Agatha looked almost pitying. “Must everyone have an ulterior motive, even your family? What has Mademoiselle Geraldine’s done to you?”

For the first time Sophronia worried that her training—the first thing she had ever really been good at—was turning her hard. Was it negatively coloring her view of the world? It was protecting her, of course, but at what cost? And here was Agatha—whose father pushed her and whose mother was absent in all ways but death—noticing.

Sophronia turned to her quiet little friend. “I don’t mean to be harsh.”

“No, you don’t. That’s what worries me.”

A glad cry from Mr. Pilldorff at the front of the shop distracted everyone. Petunia and Dimity, plus the other shoppers, moved in his direction. He had a new delivery from Paris. Even Agatha was tempted. Or perhaps she wanted to give Sophronia time alone to think. Agatha could be thoughtful like that.

The distraction was, of course, something Sophronia found suspicious. Instead of gravitating toward the yelling, she looked around the shop—was someone trying to steal something? Perhaps Agatha was right and she saw conspiracies everywhere, but this was her training, and she couldn’t shake it.

A tall young man materialized out of the workroom at the back of the shop. He brushed aside the curtain as if he had been there, milling hats, all this time. He was dressed elegantly in a cutaway jacket, buckskin breeches, and a modest top hat, with a single fall of emerald silk at his throat. Not quite a dandy, but certainly a man of fashion. He would have been nondescript, any one of a hundred gentlemen shopping on Bond Street, except that his skin was a dark mahogany color unheard of in society.

Sophronia almost didn't recognize him. Not because of time, for it had been only nine months, but because of the clothing and the way he moved. Before, he had been gangly, muscled and strong, but suffused with the awkwardness of nascent adulthood. Now his movements were liquid and his pace predatory, not all that surprising considering he was a werewolf.

"I didn't know the sun had set," said Sophronia.

"You've been here for ages. I was waiting for you to come out, but began to suspect you never would."

"Is that your doing?" Sophronia gestured to the chaos at the front of the shop.

"Of course."

"Beautiful work."

The pause was awkward, full of unsaid truths and impossible actions. Sophronia's brain swirled with options: apologies, confessions, caresses—so many possibilities that she froze with indecision. She had a wild desire to throw herself against him in a manner that would give her sister—and possibly Mr. Pilldorff—histrionics. Instead, her back snapped straight, inspired by thousands of lessons in posture. She held her hands stiff to her sides.

Finally he spoke. "You smell like lemon and roses."

Impressive. Her bottle of tincture was with her, of course, but tightly shut. "It's so good to see you again, Soap."

"I might better have believed that if you'd come to call when you first entered London."

"Be reasonable. I'm staying with my sister."

"*Reasonable* would remember you are trained in the art of subterfuge. How challenging is it for you, of all people, to sneak out of a town house?"

"Touché."

"So? It is Lord Mersey after all?"

“Felix? Don’t speak gammon. His father is a Pickleman.” Surprise shook Sophronia out of her stillness. She looked directly into Soap’s eyes. His face hadn’t changed much, though he clenched his jaw more.

“His father always *was* a Pickleman.”

“Yes, but once I thought he might rise above that. Now I know he can’t.” *Why are we talking about Felix?*

“Because he betrayed you on the tracks?”

“Because he betrayed all of us, and you were killed because of it.” Sophronia allowed a little of her frustration to leak into her words. *Why is he simply standing there?*

“Oh, I *remember* that part.” Soap moved finally, so that they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, like spectators, watching Mr. Pilldorff and the ladies unpack and exclaim over the box of goodies. The ladies vied with one another to try on scarves, to compliment each other on such exquisite taste. Dimity and Agatha might have noticed Sophronia’s visitor, for they seemed intent on keeping Petunia occupied.

“So, why haven’t you come to see me, then?” Soap spoke in one breath.

He sounds… what? Frightened? “I didn’t know if I would be welcome.” Sophronia didn’t care for artifice with Soap. She never had. He was the only one granted the privilege of complete honesty. *I wonder if he realizes that.*

“You bargained your freedom for my life. I can’t”—Soap paused, almost choking on his words—“I can’t *ever* repay that.”

“You see? There it is. I don’t want debts owed between us.” She shifted infinitesimally closer to him and put two fingers very gently on his forearm where it curled at his waist.

He looked down at her touch, then quickly up again. “Then what do you want between us?”

“Friendship would be a start.”

“No, miss, friendship would be a finish.”

An Invitation to Dine In or On?

Soap's tone of voice was no longer servile, but colored with the attitude of an equal. He was now an immortal, and he had the superiority of time on his side. True, he would have to fight for that privilege against other werewolves. Much as he had to fight against madness for his soul every full moon. Sophronia supposed that would change anyone, even a former coal scuttler. With one bite, Soap had gone from sootie to supernatural. Where once skin and station had held him back, wolfskin and loner station had made him her equal in rank in the eyes of the law—if not society.

He wasn't going to dance to her whims anymore.

Perhaps that's really why I stayed away. So much has changed between us. Am I afraid that I am no longer the one in control? Bitter with herself, Sophronia lied. "I'm not afraid of you."

He moved then, supernaturally fast, one second the prescribed distance for renewing an old acquaintance, the next plastered up against her in an intimacy that would be permitted to no one in public—not husband, not brother, not child.

"Soap! What are you—?"

He slipped one hand about her waist and whirled them, as if in a waltz, behind the curtain and into the workroom. Sophronia's feet never touched the ground. Soap had always been strong, but now she was nothing to him—biscuit light.

Before she could get her bearings, his other hand reached up to touch the side of her face, a peculiarly Soap-ish gesture. She fixated on the fact that

he hadn’t lost the calluses on his fingers. They had come with him into eternity. He was marked forever by a menial upbringing.

She loved those calluses.

Unthinking, Sophronia turned her face into his hand. Then she remembered how off this all was. How impossible. She moved as Captain Niall had taught her, a dip and twist, using leverage rather than strength to break his grip. It worked, but only because he was surprised.

“It’s not only lemon and rose. You smell delicious.”

Werewolf ability. *Am I food?* Sophronia wondered.

She felt Soap lean in close enough for his breath to muss her curls, the ones skillfully arranged by Petunia’s French maid to fall over one ear.

“No more friendship, Sophronia. That boiler is dry.”

“What, then? We can’t be more.” Her voice almost hitched, and she forced it to steady. “There’s no future for us.” They could never marry, not even if the dewan blessed the match and permitted Soap to come out into supernatural society. Right now his metamorphosis was closeted. The dewan kept his cards close, and a new werewolf was an ace in the hole. *Or is that ace in the closet? I’m getting my metaphors mixed up.* She wasn’t sure on his reasons.

Sophronia blamed her distracted thoughts on the persistent heart flutters that Soap’s proximity caused. Or was it excitement from their verbal sparring? Must be that.

“I can hear them, you know.”

“My thoughts?” Sophronia panicked, suspecting unreported werewolf abilities.

“No, silly, your heartbeats. Gives me hope.”

“I didn’t think they were that loud.”

Soap tilted his head at her. “Supernatural hearing, remember? At first it was so strange. I had no idea there were so many small sounds all the time, everywhere. It took me months to function in the outside world and hear only what was important. And that’s not the half of it. Now I understand why new pups need an Alpha to guide them.”

His speech patterns were so refined. *Part of his werewolf training?* Sophronia wondered.

He drifted his hand over her cheek, sure but slow, as if gentling a horse. His old familiar grin lit up his face.

“Soap, this is most unseemly.”

The hand dropped.

“And you could kill me in a thousand different ways if you wanted to.”

“Not anymore.”

“Lost your ability?” Soap could not believe that.

“Mostly trained for humans, remember? You’re a werewolf. I’ve only got about three ways to kill you in my repertoire. They’re good ones, though, so take care.”

He tugged her in so she was flush against him again. He was warm, which surprised her. She had thought an undead creature would be cold.

“So I can court you?”

“What did I *just* say?” Sophronia was terrified by the inevitable end of any romance between them. Her parents were not so progressive as to permit their daughter an alliance with a werewolf, even a landed Alpha, let alone one who was lowborn, newly made, and black. Safer not to start. Then she might get to keep a small part of him.

Soap was not so easy to put off. “Blast the future.”

“So says he who has too much of one.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Sophronia winced. Her shoulders sagged.

Soap clearly regretted this accusation. “I don’t blame you.”

Which was part of the problem. *You should. My plan put you in danger. Then I took all your choices away from you because I was too much of a coward to let you go. And now everything is confusing and messy and impossible.*

“I know.” Sophronia turned to leave.

“I’m going to change your mind about us, Sophronia.” Unusual statement, for Soap never said her name, and he now had twice. Things really had changed.

Sophronia shot back, tartly, “I’d like to see you try.”

“Done.”

Annoyed that her addlepated heart had allowed her mouth to give him an opening, she snapped, “What do you want, Soap?”

“Now, why would you think I wanted something more than this?” He grabbed her hand and raised it to kiss. Even through her gloves, she swore she could feel the softness of his lips.

She gave him a long-suffering look.

Soap let her go, tipped off his top hat, and dug about in the inside band, producing an embossed card. He flourished it. “He would very much like to see you. Saturday evening.”

It was an invitation to attend a dinner party and theatrical production. Sophronia glanced at it quickly before tucking it down the side of her décolletage. “I’m not out yet. It may be difficult to convince Petunia.”

“I think she’ll make an exception in this case. The invitation is directed at you and your chosen guests. If your sister wishes to attend, she cannot come without you.”

“Will you be there?”

Soap’s smile was somewhat sly, with a hint of canine to the sides. “I, too, am not yet *out*.”

Sophronia nibbled her lower lip. Steeling herself. “Soap, I think we should establish a safe place to meet. If for any reason either of us goes missing. If our communication is compromised.”

“Are you planning on disappearing?”

“No, but I like to keep my options open. You are the only real friend I have stationed in London.”

“You are *such* an intelligencer.” Soap sounded almost exasperated. “Very well. Regent Square, an hour before dawn.” His dark eyes flicked once behind Sophronia’s shoulder at the curtain, and then he was gone, out a window at the back. Supernatural speed put to secrecy was impressive.

Sophronia grimaced. He had asked to court her, but hadn’t kissed her properly. She wasn’t sure if she should be upset or grateful for the reprieve. She hated herself for the confusion.

She emerged from the back room just as Petunia went to stick her head inside.

Agatha and Dimity trailed behind, looking worried.

“Oomph! There you are, sister, what are you doing back here?”

Sophronia gestured at a table covered in trim. “I thought I saw a finished hat that wasn’t on display.”

“Did you? Where?”

“Turns out it wasn’t finished. What was in the box from Paris?”

“Oh, the most divine shawls! Come see.” Petunia swept toward the front of the shop.

Agatha and Dimity swirled alongside Sophronia, one to each arm, and hustled after. Three abreast was challenging given the displays, but necessary for private conversation.

“What is going on?” Dimity demanded.

“Soap,” replied Sophronia.

“I was wondering when he’d turn up.” Dimity’s tone was cautious. “What did he want?”

“We have an invitation to dine and view a short play.”

Dimity bounced, clapping her hands. “Oh, goody, who with?” Her face fell. “Not with Soap? That would be awkward.” She brightened. “The dewan?”

“That would be boring and political.” Agatha was thinking about the dewan’s position in Queen Victoria’s government.

“No, not the dewan.” Sophronia did enjoy torturing her friends.

“Who, then? Don’t keep us in suspense!” Dimity’s eyes were wild.

“Lord Akeldama.”

“The vampire? Oh, dear.” Dimity was crestfallen. “You don’t think he wants to eat *us*, do you?”

Sophronia managed to *discover* the invitation waiting for them in the hallway when they got home. She presented it to her sister. It was met with paroxysms of joy. This was the kind of event Petunia had craved since first entering society. This was the dinner party to end all dinner parties. The fact that there was a slim chance they might *be* the dinner at said party was a small price to pay for the honor of being invited.

“Oh, this is *too* exciting. This Saturday, it says. Hardly enough time. We must go out first thing tomorrow in pursuit of dresses. Oh, dear, we will have to settle for something ready-made.”

Sophronia was feeling cheeky. “But sister dear, we aren’t yet out. Do you think it wise to expose yourself to ridicule and us to social *faux pas*?”

“At a small private gathering with such an illustrious host? I think we can make an exception. You must trust in my judgment. After all, I have spent these last few days in your company. You are all well polished. That school of yours has much to recommend it.”

“You don’t know the half,” muttered Sophronia.

Petunia talked over her. “Perhaps I shall send my daughters there.” She patted her tummy smugly.

Dimity didn’t even crack a smile. “How thoughtful. I shall tell Mademoiselle Geraldine. She will be charmed, I’m sure.”

Petunia patted Dimity’s hand in a condescending way. “Oh, but why did I think we would have more need of visiting gowns than evening wear? We have wasted two shopping days already. Miss Woosmoss, of course, I know you are well set up. And Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott?”

“I brought my best from last season. It’ll do.”

Petunia shook her head, forehead creased. “For anyone but Lord Akeldama. He is a *leader* of fashion. The Beau Brummel of our times, and many times in the past, before Mr. Brummel, for that matter. Oh, dear, I am all aflutter. Sophronia, do you have anything appropriate at all?”

Sophronia shook her head. “Could I borrow something of yours, perhaps?”

“Now, there *is* a notion. I might have something from my trousseau. How lucky that we are the same height and complexion.”

Petunia sashayed off and returned with a pretty satin dress, simpler than expected given her taste. Sophronia liked it instantly. It was pale blue brocade with royal-blue flowers appliquéd on top and matching ribbon for trim. Copious quantities of some quality cream lace peeked out at the cuffs, enough to hide both obstructor and hurlie should she wear them. Her favorite part was the neckline, a deep but narrow V with lace collar. In a world peopled with scoop necklines, it was unique and flattering. It would make her appear tall and elegant.

“I adore it!”

Everyone stopped and stared at her. It wasn’t like Sophronia to go into ecstasies over a dress.

“Are you feeling quite well?” Dimity hissed.

Sophronia was eager for distraction. *Perhaps a bit too eager.* It might have had something to do with Soap. She gave her friend the hand signal of *discretion.*

Dimity subsided.

“You’re sure? We could try shopping tomorrow morning?” Petunia was not one to be waylaid where spending money was possible.

“I’d only want to find one exactly like this.”

Petunia pinked with delight. “Very well, then. You may have it. By the time it fits me again, it will be sadly out of date.”

“Oh, thank you.” Sophronia actually hugged her sister.

Petunia allowed it and then brushed her away. “Really, Sophronia, I’m not accustomed to such emotional displays. It’s quite exhausting. Now I must nap. Off with you three, go try things on. I know you want to more than anything. See about accessories.”

The girls did as instructed. Although it must be admitted they spent some time also discussing how to hide deadly little knives in their hair, whether Sophronia’s favorite *carnet de bal* garrote was too much at a dinner party, and if Bumbersnoot could be decorated to match the dress. They did not talk of Soap, although Sophronia could tell Dimity dearly wanted to.

The blue gown turned out to be exactly the correct choice. For while Lord Akeldama was a vampire who pursued excess in all things himself, he appreciated refinement in others. Although he appeared welcoming as he ushered them into his well-appointed home near Regent’s Park, his eyes were critical. The vampire uttered not one negative word, but Dimity suddenly knew herself to be wearing too much jewelry. Petunia realized that her condition was no secret to the discerning eye. And Agatha, poor Agatha, was convinced she was a failure in all things fashionable, although her dress was *à la mode* and her hair had taken *three* hours.

Sophronia’s subtle gown and understated pearls, however, met with approval. The ghost of a smile twitched at Lord Akeldama’s perfectly pouty lips as he evaluated her attire.

“How lovely to see such beautiful *butterflies*. My, but I do adore groups of ladies. They always balance out my table so very *decorously*. I blush to admit it, but my assemblies are too often weighted in the gentlemanly direction. Speaking of which, drones! Oh, where are my drones? You butterflies simply must have *matched* escort flowers.”

Lord Akeldama was dressed in emerald satin with a cream-and-gold striped waistcoat, and a cream silk cravat tied over with an emerald ribbon. He wore a gold-and-emerald tie pin that gave Dimity a small case of the

vapors.

"Now, that," she whispered to Sophronia, "is most certainly *not* paste!"

At Lord Akeldama's summons, a group of stunning young men trooped down the stairs from their private chambers above. They were all dressed as impeccably as their master, if perhaps not quite so flash. Sophronia felt a pang of loss at having been forced to turn down Lord Akeldama's offer of patronage. *Only think, at one time I might have lived among all this beauty.* The drones stood, untroubled, as the vampire evaluated them carefully and then paired each with one of the young women—based on color, of course.

Sophronia privately suspected that character was also taken into account. Lord Akeldama was shallow—or he liked to be thought that way—but not so shallow as to sacrifice conversational flow on the altar of fashion. Not for an entire evening, at least.

"Mrs. Hisselpenny, such a lovely rose pink, you would go well with Peanut here." Peanut proved to be tall, with a shock of thick caramel-colored hair and a long, friendly face. He wore apple green, which paired with Petunia's pink to look very like a rosebush.

"Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, such sparkles go well with Bolo. Good evening, Bolo, *my pearl*." Dimity was in a froth of layered cream muslin, demure except that the sleeves were transparent and the hem had a band of lavender embroidery. Of course, she was also wearing a great deal of—supposedly—amethyst jewelry. Bolo, a shorter, stouter individual with an angelic round face and the most stunning dark eyes, wore black velvet and gray and no jewelry at all, not even a pin.

"You are the *moon* to his night sky." Lord Akeldama ushered them off together.

Sophronia swallowed down a smile.

"Now, for Miss Woosmoss, perhaps Dingle?" Dingle stepped forward. If being matched with Agatha was an insult, his expression showed nothing but pleasure at her company. He was blond with blue eyes, his evening suit of chocolate brown. Sophronia had to admit that if anything were to go with Agatha's unfortunate ruffled orange gown, that was it. Together they looked like a pumpkin patch.

While the others were led away, the vampire turned on Sophronia. "Which leaves you, my *dearest kitten*."

"Lord Akeldama, it is such a pleasure to see you again." Sophronia

attempted to retain some of the conversational territory, which the vampire, in a remarkable imitation of a military invasion, had taken into his possession from the moment they pulled the bell rope.

He smiled, showing fang.

Sophronia took it like a girl who had been educated by a vampire. She gave him her best wolfish grin back, showing all her teeth and making certain it did not reach her eyes.

“Like that, is it? More *lioness* than kitten now.” Lord Akeldama inclined his head.

He had given her an opening. “So unexpectedly kind of you to extend an invitation to three lowly schoolgirls.”

“’Twas all for you, *my little posy* of teeth.”

“You may find I also have claws.”

The vampire laughed and extended her his arm to lead her in himself—quite the honor. “I shall take the risk, *my vicious pet*. I find you *terribly* intriguing.” He waved away the rest of his drones and they vanished about other tasks.

“You find me intriguing? I should have thought that impulse passed by now, my lord.”

“Now, now, no one, *kitten*, has ever called me *impulsive*. Many things, but *never* that. Time has so little meaning for me, I can afford to take it slowly. Carefully research any *subject of interest*.”

Sophronia wasn’t certain how she felt about being a *subject of interest*, but she wished to make her situation clear—for everyone’s safety. “My lord, you did receive my letter?”

Lord Akeldama allowed his face to fall. “Crushed, my *dearest moggie*. It’s not often I offer for a female drone, you do realize?”

“I am aware of the honor. Circumstances, my lord, forced another choice upon me.”

Lord Akeldama’s perfect forehead crinkled. “*Coercion?* My dear, I do not like to hear that *at all*.”

Sophronia hastened to prevent disaster. “It is not an unwelcome position. I am satisfied with my future and my bargain.” With the Picklemen on the move, the last thing she wanted was Lord Akeldama, powerful vampire rove, and the dewan, powerful werewolf loner, at each other’s proverbial throats.

Her letter had declined Lord Akeldama's offer of indenture without specifying who had won her instead. So far as she knew, the vampire remained ignorant of the fact that, when she left school, she would work for the werewolves. Sophronia was hoarding that story as ammunition. Lord Akeldama desired information above all things. There might come a time when she could use gossip about herself to bargain for his help. No sense in giving anything away. Lord Akeldama was no charity case. Even this dinner was no doubt in pursuit of some end to which her presence was a means. She was not so foolish as to believe it was actually an honor.

The vampire watched her closely. She hoped none of her thoughts showed on her face. Lady Linette had schooled them in impassive expressions, but she knew her eyes were hard to control. And Lord Akeldama was very good at perceiving without showing that he did. *I wonder if that is a product of his age or if he, too, once had training.*

Without further private communication, they followed the others into a large back parlor. The house was decorated in a baroque style, but what intrigued Sophronia was how many of the gilt frames, decorative lamps, and pretty vases were also deadly. They'd studied some of the makers. The gas lamp that detached and exploded on impact was from a Swiss clockmaker. The frames with the leaf corners that became knives were from a private dealer in Manchester. Lord Akeldama was a vampire after her own heart. Although, to be frank, her taste was less ornate. Dimity, however, was in raptures.

The back parlor was arranged like a music room, with couches and armchairs all facing a small performing area.

"This play, my lord, what is it called?" asked Sophronia, aware that they were now easily overheard by the others.

"It is a witty little invention of Bolo's. Currently, he is calling it *The Importance of Wearing Ermine*, but the title may change. Shall we sit?"

The play was indeed a witty little invention. Although clearly designed to appeal to ladies and poodle fakers, it was, nevertheless, replete with enough verbal skirmishing to delight even Sophronia, who customarily had more serious dramatic preferences. In Shakespearean fashion, all the roles were played by men. This only added comedic effect.

Dimity was heard to squeak with delight at more than one exchange of repartee. Petunia laughed several times. Even Agatha tittered. The result

being that praise was heaped upon an ebullient Bolo as soon as the bowing commenced.

There was enough fodder in the play to engage them all in conversation over aperitifs until other guests, invited only for the meal, began to arrive.

At each announcement, Lord and Lady So-and-so, Mr. Such-and-such, Petunia became increasingly agitated. At one point, she dragged Sophronia into a corner to chatter about it before she exploded. "*Everyone* who is *anyone* is here tonight. And not only the known elements from the daylight society papers, but the real important types written of in the *Evening Cupboard*! Oh, Sophronia, please behave yourself. I know finishing school saw you turn over a new leaf, and you have been golden this past week, but don't hurl any food at anyone? Please?"

Sophronia, of course, knew everyone there. Before he went mad, Professor Braithwope drilled them on the *ton*—humans and supernaturals. Lord Akeldama was hosting a representative sample—four landed gentry, two active members of the Staking Constabulary, the chief field operative for the Bureau of Unnatural Registry, an overseer of the Vault of England, *and* a proper Ghost Wrangler. Sophronia even recognized those at whose import Petunia could only guess. The nondescript Mr. Thermopopple was, in fact, official inventor to the queen. And the mild-mannered sandy-haired professor was actually Beta to the local werewolf pack.

She was not surprised, therefore, when the dewan turned up. He sent a curt nod in her general direction. She understood that this meant their arrangement was to continue a secret and found it no challenge to ignore him. As expected, he had not brought Soap. She let out the puff of breath she hadn't known she was holding.

The other member of the Shadow Council, the potentate, was absent. Adviser to the queen, and the patron of Mademoiselle Geraldine's, he was no doubt *important*. But, with few exceptions, a vampire was not able to safely visit another's home. That said, Sophronia suspected at least one person come to dine was in the potentate's pay, possibly several.

They were called into dinner by a butler-type human. This was not so odd, as vampires refused to employ mechanicals. He was of middling years and so ordinary that Sophronia would have passed him by, except that he moved like he could kill someone and would be good at it. All three of Geraldine's girls looked at the butler with interest from under lowered

lashes. He blinked impassively, holding the door. *He does not like to be noticed*, thought Sophronia. *And he doesn't like Lord Akeldama.*

There seemed to be no consideration of the order of precedence in seating. Instead, they were guided gently but firmly by the drones to sit in a pattern orchestrated by Lord Akeldama. The girls were seated as far apart from each other as possible. They would be unable to pass notes. Dimity was next to the funny little inventor, Mr. Thermopopple, to whom she paid rapt attention. Dimity would never misapply dinner conversation. She would take advantage of the man's expertise if it killed her. Given his flat voice and questionable subject matter—who cared about float capacity dynamics?—she risked at least being maimed by monotone. Agatha was next to the pack representative. The Beta was making an effort to put her at ease, but also trying to determine why three schoolgirls and their chaperone were in the midst of such august company. Petunia sat in a state of terror next to the dewan.

"Good evening," rumbled the dewan.

"Meep," said Petunia. Sophronia couldn't fault her—the dewan terrified her on occasion.

The dewan rolled his eyes and turned to his other dining companion.

The long table was decorated with statues of shepherds and shepherdesses, and Grecian urns full of fluffy ferns arranged in such a way as to make hand signals nearly impossible between Agatha, Dimity, and Sophronia. Sophronia, on Lord Akeldama's right, gave him a mock salute at the mastery of the arrangement. *Nicely done.* The known spies had been neutralized from communication. She felt isolated. But what the vampire had forgotten was that she had worked alone successfully before. Her friends were her strength, but not her *only* strength.

They were about to start eating when one final guest was ushered in—the type of guest who loved to make an entrance and had timed her lateness accordingly.

Monique de Pelouse was stunning in a dress of teal watered silk with black braid piping emphasizing her tiny waist. Her hair was a pile of gold, woven through with teal ribbon. Her sleeves were full enough to hide an armament, but not so full as to impede eating. Perhaps she wore a dash too much rouge, but only Sophronia suspected the rosy glow.

Lord Akeldama stood to greet her. He accorded her a distinction she did

not deserve, gesturing her to the empty seat on his left, across from Sophronia.

“My dear Miss Pelouse, welcome. Does everyone here know Miss Pelouse? Lovely. Now that we have the countess’s representative, perhaps we can begin?”

A parade of drones, not footmen—*Lord Akeldama wants only those he can trust working tonight*—began serving. There were beautiful dishes for the human guests, exquisitely arranged platters of raw meat for the werewolves, and champagne mixed with blood for Lord Akeldama.

Sophronia had predicted that Lord Akeldama’s menu would be as frivolous as his dress. But in the matter of food, he either had simple tastes, or he farmed it out to someone who still ingested the stuff. The humans started with a pea soup made with ham broth, accompanied by bread sprinkled with powdered mint. The fish course was a John Dory in sage sauce, followed by a joint of beef with carrots, veal cutlets in curry gravy, and pheasant with truffles. They finished with a white pudding and stewed apples. It was delicious and perfectly prepared, but Sophronia could tell that others found it disappointingly familial.

Since Lord Akeldama was busy ensuring that the conversation flowed, Sophronia turned to her other dining partner. He had a laugh that sounded like he was chewing air and was already in deep conversation with his neighbor, unwilling to entertain the whims of a schoolgirl. She summarily dismissed him with equal disregard and greater contempt. Imagine discounting someone on the grounds of age and gender! Then again, she was trained to take advantage of exactly that kind of ignorance. However, it meant she was forced to look across the way, through the fern fronds, to Monique.

“Miss Pelouse, how are you this evening? I haven’t seen you in ages.” Sophronia dove in with a will.

“I suspect that is healthier for both of us, Miss Temminnick.” Monique was as barbed as ever.

“Oh, my, you didn’t suffer any adverse effect from your impromptu swim last winter, I hope?” Sophronia recalled Monique’s offended squawking fondly.

“Certainly not. I have an exceptional constitution.”

Sophronia nibbled her fish, pausing to phrase her next dart. “How are

you finding the hive these days?”

“I consider myself quite pleasantly situated, thank you,” replied Monique primly. “I understand you are in London for the holidays?”

“To visit my dear sister. Recently married.” Sophronia gestured with her chin at Petunia, who was giggling desperately at the dewan.

Monique gave Petunia a disgusted look. “I suppose we all have our crosses to bear.”

Sophronia said, with no little feeling, “Too true. So the hive is still comfortable despite your misfortunes?” She tried to play on a sympathetic angle.

Monique sidestepped her. “We acquired a rather nice dirigible recently.”

“How excellent for the upcoming summer months. But surely, vampires cannot partake?”

“Sadly, no. But the rest of us are encouraged to learn the basics of floating. Drones must go where vampires cannot. It’s our role.”

“How nice for you. Is it a large craft?” Sophronia wasn’t certain why Monique would intentionally pass on information about hive assets. *Is it a veiled threat of some kind?*

“Not very, but I understand it possesses not inconsiderable speed.”

Now, that really was too much information. *What is Monique up to?* “Worried about flywaymen, are we?”

“No, not flywaymen.”

Conversational flow being as it was, Monique’s last phrase shot out into a lull and reverberated down the table.

Everyone looked at her.

Petunia broke the awkward silence. “Oh, *those* horrible miscreants.”

Monique tossed her head. “Well, it’s not them I’m worried about. Everyone knows who skulks behind the flywaymen these days. Is that not what we’ve been brought here to discuss? Or am I assuming too much, my lord?”

Sophronia looked through the fronds at her fellow diners for expressions of surprise. *Petunia, of course, and perhaps two or three others.*

Lord Akeldama leaned back, sipping his fizzy blood. “Has the countess told you something significant, Miss Pelouse?”

Monique stabbed at her fish. “Are you going to let them get away with it?” She looked down the table at the dewan. “Are you?” Then over at the

werewolf Beta, gesturing at him with a fork loaded with John Dory. “Are you?”

“Come now, Miss Pelouse, no need to point fish. Let us allow the conversation to flow naturally, shall we?” As if by the vampire’s command, the others turned back to their dining companions.

Sophronia tilted her head at her erstwhile nemesis. Monique looked annoyed.

“Have you any holiday plans, Miss Pelouse?” With her free hand she gave the signal, *What was that about?*

“I had thought to visit my family, touring in Paris. Beautiful city, have you ever been?” *You already know.* To Sophronia’s surprise, Monique actually fluttered a reply. The problem with hand signals was that they were limited in specificity, being intended only for extractions from sticky social situations, or sticky physical situations, or, occasionally, both.

“Sadly, no. Someday I should very much like to. I hear the shopping is unparalleled.” Why was Monique, of all people, trying to force the situation? Did she have insight into the Picklemen’s immediate intentions? Was she was under orders from Countess Nadasdy to press the dewan’s hand? The vampires fancied striking against the Picklemen first, asking questions second.

Monique chose to ignore Sophronia at that point, focusing on her food.

Sophronia did the same, listening closely to the conversations ebbing around her. The newspaperman with the piercing voice argued vociferously with the dewan about some *malfunction*. Whatever it was, Petunia was following, so it must be common knowledge. The newspaperman seemed the type to always argue, but Sophronia blessed his aggression because she could hear every word, even though they were halfway down the table.

“You cannot blame the government for a failure in private enterprise.” The dewan defended the Crown.

“My dear sir, we blame no one. We’re perfectly objective”—someone laughed coldly—“but public perception is that since everyone who is anyone has them, it is a society-wide situation, and the government is responsible. Like the water supply, or the gas, or even helium.”

A hush met that statement. Imagine, mentioning *utilities* at the dinner table.

Dimity spoke up, compelled by her training to cover for his gaffe. Of

course, she was also happy to appear driven to attend his mistake while actually seeking further insight. “Forgive me for asking, but I have been away at finishing school and am regrettably out of touch. Has there been another opera incident?” *Never underestimate Dimity.*

The newspaperman looked kindly upon ignorance packaged behind a lovely face with wide hazel eyes framed by honey-colored hair. “Yes, my dear. Only recently my paper—you know it, of course, the *Mooring Standard*?—reported that a wave of mechanical malfunctions has been sweeping the nation.”

Sophronia was momentarily distracted by Bumbersnoot. He had been quietly slung over the back of her chair, but now was scrabbling to be set down.

Fortunately, no one seemed to notice except Lord Akeldama, who gave her a sideways look. Sophronia couldn’t afford to hush Bumbersnoot with a protocol command, so she stuck him in her lap. He remained so restless, she set him on the floor. He scuttled out the door and down the hallway. Sophronia figured if anyone could cope with her mechanimal, it was Lord Akeldama’s drones. They’d probably adopt him and dress him like a maiden aunt.

Dimity continued to coax. “Oh, but the opera, when sung by mechanicals, it is quite offensive. Can nothing be done to stop it?”

“My dear young lady, not *opera*. More a wave of small shutdowns, brief enough not to be noticed until one of my best investigators uncovered them. They have been happening in multiple households, in isolated pockets, all over the country.”

Sophronia looked hard at the dewan.

Monique jumped on the opening. “You see? They *are* up to something. Perhaps intending to damage the core of the Empire itself.”

The inventor chap, next to Dimity, joined the conversation. “We have seen no serious repercussions. Nothing but a spate of inconvenient shutdowns, and that first minor opera.”

The newspaperman seemed to take this as criticism of his reporting. “But it *did* happen, and all over, and no one knew about the shutdowns until we exposed them.”

Petunia moved gracefully back into the conversation. “I read your article on the subject with interest. We employ several mechanicals in our

household, and I am concerned over their reliability. And the safety of my family, of course."

"Exactly my point." The newspaperman perceived this as support. "You are wise to be cautious, Mrs. Hunnelprissy."

"Hisselpenny."

Sophronia wished she could have a moment with the dewan. Had the government known about these shutdowns and covered them up, only to have the newspapers expose them? Or had they not known? The first meant they were evil. The second that they were incompetent and that the Picklemen were a step ahead.

"This is only a series of tests. They are planning something big." Monique spoke with utter conviction.

The newspaperman was interested. "Oh? And who is this *they* of whom you speak? The government?" He looked ready to whip out his notebook.

The dewan was dismissive. "Nonsense, Gengulphus."

The newspaper man took offense.

So did Monique.

The dewan, Sophronia realized, had very little training in the matter of conversational manipulation. *I shall have to educate my own patron. How tiresome.*

The dinner table erupted into argument, political accusations flying. No one named the Picklemen, and it was clear the newspaperman—and others—didn't know of their existence. Some thought the conservatives might be trying to discredit the progressives. Some thought the vampires and werewolves, both always anti-mechanical, were somehow causing them to malfunction to prove a point.

Soon the entire table was involved. A gleeful Dimity egged everyone on. It was a good tactic, as high dudgeon often yielded information. Agatha paid rapt attention to the proceedings, inserting an occasional well-timed and seemingly innocent question that tossed more coal upon the fire.

Sophronia turned to stare, quite obviously, at Lord Akeldama. *What is he up to?*

The vampire's face was impassive, but the person holding most of his attention was the newspaperman. What was his name? *Ah, yes, Lemuel Gengulphus.*

Perhaps we are going about this wrong, Sophronia thought, watching

both vampire and muckraker. Lord Akeldama wants to know what the Picklemen are up to. So does Monique. So do I. But perhaps this *is* what they are up to. *Perhaps their real plan is not death, destruction, or war but to make the government and the supernaturals running it look incompetent and unable to control technology. What if the Picklemen intend to force a major mechanical malfunction and then arrange for their political allies to heroically rescue everyone from the mechanicals? They could then overturn the supernatural stronghold on the government by arguing incompetence.*

The dewan seemed to think that greater controls should be in place over mechanical technology. His stance was that the government might have to step in and remove or destroy them all, by force if necessary.

Petunia practically fainted at the idea. “But what would we *do* without mechanized staff?”

The newspaperman and the other humans at the table, including the inventor, also found this idea scandalous.

“Knives are dangerous, my lord, but we do not regulate them!” objected the inventor.

“True,” said the dewan. “But gas can explode, and we regulate *that*.”

The argument was becoming one of ideology rather than specifics, as these things do. Sophronia, however, wanted specifics. If she didn’t know exactly what the Picklemen were up to, how could she stop them?

Lord Akeldama stood. He was not very physically imposing, but he was their host, and his rising caused the table to quiet.

“Most entertaining, my dears, but as the cheese is away, perhaps we should adjourn to the drawing room? I have *something* there that might interest everyone.”

A murmur of excitement met that, and accordingly the gentlemen assisted the ladies to rise. The guests made their way out into the hallway. The dewan actually offered Petunia his arm. And Petunia took it!

Dimity, Agatha, and Sophronia lingered. Dimity pretended to have misplaced something. Agatha intentionally forgot her gloves. Sophronia found herself fascinated by the fern arrangements.

They clustered close.

“What do you think?” Sophronia asked.

Dimity’s nose wrinkled. “The food was rather too similar to something we might get at school.”

Agatha said, “Monique’s dress is divine.”

Sophronia glared at them.

Dimity giggled. “You are *so* predictable.”

“Quickly, please.”

“Now you sound like Lady Linette.” Dimity still wouldn’t play.

“So?” Sophronia was driven to put her hands on her hips.

Agatha crumbled. “The dewan doesn’t like that the government might be accused of malfeasance, but he also doesn’t want Parliament to attack the Picklemen openly. Not when, so far as they can prove, the Picklemen haven’t done anything legally wrong.”

“Agreed. Dimity?”

“Mr. Gengulphus is not as objective as his profession suggests. He would prefer to see the government humiliated, and if the vampires and werewolves share the sin, so much the better.”

“Is he politically conservative or in the pay of the Picklemen?”

Dimity pursed her lips. “I don’t think either. Simply one of those men who always suspects the people in power, whoever they may be.”

Sophronia nodded. “I can understand that stance.”

“Of course *you* can, you heathen.” Dimity was slightly proud of her reprobate friend. “Except that we know that Picklemen in charge would be worse.”

“Yes, we do.” Sophronia bit her lip. “We’d better follow before we’re missed. Plan of action?”

“I’ll keep egging them on when I can.” Dimity knew her strengths.

Sophronia grinned. “You do egg beautifully.”

Dimity went all over sly. “It’s all fun and information until the yolk breaks.”

Agatha said, “I’ll stick to the inventor. I don’t know why he was invited. He doesn’t seem to have a political stake in this situation, and while he works for the queen, he’s not that powerful.”

“Is it possible he’s a Pickleman intelligencer?” suggested Sophronia.

“Would Lord Akeldama invite one into our midst?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t figured out why he’s doing any of this.” Sophronia was only mildly frustrated. She doubted anyone could fully understand their vampire host in the space of a human life-span, let alone during the course of a dinner party.

“A man of many motives,” suggested Agatha darkly.

“Or, worse, none at all,” replied Sophronia.

They made their way out into the hallway, precisely in time to hear a shrill whining nose and then a *woof* sound, which ended in an impossibly loud boom.

The door to the drawing room exploded outward. Several top hats were carried with the blast, flying through the opening on a cloud of smoke, falling to roll sadly on the plush carpet.

Sophronia could only think of one thing.

“Bumbersnoot!”

A Problem of Motivation

Sophronia, Agatha, and Dimity ran toward the door now hanging by its bottom hinge. Drones came dashing from all parts of the house.

Sophronia's mind was in a loop of worry. *Is Bumbersnoot in there? Is the explosion his fault? Or has he exploded himself, without permission?* And then, *Petunia!*

They clustered at the doorway, peering into chaos. The smoke cleared, exposing a remarkable tableau. Something large and mechanical had caused the blast. It had started out on a table in the center of the room, but now its parts were scattered everywhere and the table was cracked in half. It was hard to tell what it had been, but now it *wasn't* anymore. There were shards of glass or possibly crystal, as well as gears, valves, coal, chains, and springs everywhere. But what really drew the eye was the guests.

The supernatural creatures had leapt to shield the mortals. Lord Akeldama had whisked Monique behind a couch. The sandy-haired werewolf had the inventor and the newspaperman down flat on their fronts with him partly on top. The dewan had taken Petunia under his wing. The deadly butler, who might or might not be supernatural, had two others shielded by an overturned table in the far corner. But they hadn't been able to get to everyone. There was a good deal of blood, mostly on arms and backs, as those without guardians had turned away to shield their heads. No one seemed dead, but several were certainly prone and writhing. Both active members of the Staking Constabulary, the chief field operative for the Bureau of Unnatural Registry, the overseer of the Vault of England, *and*

the Ghost Wrangler were down.

Petunia looked sobered but showed no inclination to faint, scream, or cry. Sophronia felt oddly proud.

“Your sister has unexpected fortitude.” Agatha voiced Sophronia’s thoughts. “I suppose you must get it from somewhere.” She sounded quite adult in her assessment of the Temminnick family character.

The rustle of a crinkling dinner dress and a small sigh next to them drew their attention.

Dimity had noticed not only the blood on the human victims but that the backs of many of the supernaturals had been torn to shreds by shrapnel and were leaking slow black blood in large dollops. She fainted into the willing arms of one of the drones.

Sophronia and Agatha left her to it.

Sophronia dutifully went to check on her sister, all the while covertly searching the room for Bumbersnoot. Agatha began to circulate with a dampened handkerchief and sympathetic expression. The drones ran to their master, and by proxy, Monique, helping them to stand, cooing and brushing them down. Lord Akeldama began issuing orders for hot water, bandages, dust removers, cleaning supplies, smelling salts, clothing, tea, and the like. The drones, having ascertained that he was both unhurt and unruffled, ran to do his bidding. He held a heavily perfumed handkerchief to his nose and passed the same on to the werewolves, so they would not be tempted by all the human blood.

Sophronia thought the vampire seemed more offended by the destruction of clothing than anything else. There was a hint of hauteur to his orders that was not ordinarily part of his public persona.

The victims began to slowly sit and take stock. The newspaperman, looking equal parts pleased and terrified, made hasty farewells. He retrieved his coat from the hallway, and throwing it over his now wrinkled evening suit, dashed off into the night. He had his headline for tomorrow’s paper.

The supernaturals milled around, assessing the damage. The drones tended to the wounded.

“Petunia, are you unhurt?” Sophronia took her sister’s hand in both of hers in a clasp she had read about in one of Dimity’s horrible Gothic novels.

“It appears that way, sister. I am most grateful to the dewan for his protection. I believe I owe him my life. Too kind, too kind. Although I must

say this was more excitement than I was anticipating from a dinner party. Even among such august company."

"What was it that exploded?"

"Some odd mechanical. Lord Akeldama was saying how it had unexpectedly come into his possession and that he thought we might like to see such a unique specimen. Then there was this whistling teakettle noise, and it went *poof*."

Sophronia nibbled her lip. *Uh-oh. Whistling teakettle sounds like Bumbersnoot. I wonder if something in Vieve's adaptations conflicted with this mechanical?* Under the guise of helping her sister to her feet, she continued to check the room.

Still no Bumbersnoot.

Fortunately, none of the broken parts looked to belong to him. He was a particularly tiny mechanimal. All his bits were undersized, and the ones scattered around were too large for him. She noticed a large chunk of one of the new crystalline valves, distinctive in its bluish shade and multiple facets, which meant the Picklemen at one point had had their mitts on that exploding mechanical.

After helping Petunia to sit and serving her with a necessary cup of restorative tea—three sugars to cope with the drama—Sophronia joined Agatha in tending to the company. They helped where they could, all the while looking for important clues and evaluating the scattered parts.

There wasn't much to do. By the time Dimity had recovered from her faint, all the supernatural creatures were fully healed, and the drones had seen them dressed in fresh shirts and jackets. They no longer matched quite so well, but even Dimity's stylish sensibilities could not be ruffled so much by the new attire as to make her faint again. She joined the others in practicing the fine art of administrative small talk and ministrations after a crisis.

They were all obeying their training to the letter. *I don't mean to be crass, ladies, but keep your wits about you, for it is after a disaster that intelligence is most likely spilled*, Lady Linette always said. Thus they milled, and cooed, and soothed, and acted like little angels of mercy, and listened, and learned. So did Monique.

Sophronia was checking on the Ghost Wrangler, a crone shrouded in the long white veil and gray robes of her trade. Her upper arm and shoulder

were badly scraped, and Sophronia tried to be gentle with the elderly lady, but she would keep twisting to try to say something. Finally, Sophronia got the bandage wrapped and helped the lady to sit on a nearby stool.

With a frantic glance around, the crone swiveled her face away from the company and parted her veil slightly. Sophronia thought she might be about to expectorate, but instead she hissed in a shaky voice, “Closer! I risked much to get this to you, and you missed the show.”

Sophronia recognized the voice. Madame Spetuna! One of Geraldine’s field agents, and their best Pickleman infiltrator.

“The explosion was intentional?” Sophronia could only see the intelligencer’s mouth. It twisted in annoyance.

“No. But this gathering was at my request.”

“You work for Lord Akeldama?”

“Sometimes. That is not important. What’s important is that they are building war mechanicals. That’s what this was. They used our pilot technology and intend to create mechanicals that can commandeer military dirigibles.”

That’s why the Picklemen snuck on board! Not to steal something, but to draw schematics so they can copy the school’s pilot mechanical.

Madame Spetuna continued. “My communication threads to the school have been eliminated, so it’s up to you to relay the information.”

“Lady Linette won’t believe me.”

“You must *make* her believe.”

“How?”

“My file, the record room, there’s a…” Madame Spetuna trailed off as Monique approached, looking quite interested in Sophronia’s conversation. Then a drone appeared and ushered Madame Spetuna away, muttering something about visiting a surgeon. Sophronia had faith in Madame Spetuna’s ability to extricate herself and return to the Picklemen. She was one of the best intelligencers Sophronia had ever met.

Things died down after that. Sophronia never did find Bumbersnoot anywhere. They delayed their departure as long as was seemly under the circumstances, in the guise of offering assistance. But Petunia would not be denied a graceful exit, and she certainly wasn’t going to help clean. The restrictions of propriety must be honored. So Sophronia, not wanting to disturb Lord Akeldama with trivialities, left a note with one of the drones

saying she had misplaced her reticule. It was dog-shaped and had great sentimental value. If he found it, would he please see it returned? She worried that someone from the party had stolen Bumbersnoot. But there was nothing more she could do given the recent crisis. Any fuss from her would look suspiciously selfish by comparison to injuries, destroyed evening wear, and a cracked table.

The dewan gave her a significant look before they parted ways. He probably expected a full report from her. *I don't work for you yet.* She glared at him.

They set off in Petunia's luxurious coach and arrived back at the Hisselpennys' town house feeling a little shattered. They were much earlier back than they had planned.

"Sister, may Agatha stay awhile longer? The night is still so young. For cards or something equally pedestrian? To calm us down?" Sophronia batted her eyes a little.

"Ah, I remember when I was young like you. Such energy." Sophronia hid a smile. Petunia was only eighteen. "Your father won't miss you, Miss Woosmoss?" Petunia made a token protest.

Agatha shook her head, red curls bouncing.

A small whirring heralded Petunia's mechanical butler proffering a red lacquered tray.

"Cards came while we were out?" Petunia tossed them over. Two invitations and a sweep-cleaning service. "Well, the invitations are not what they might be, but better than none, I suppose. And perhaps the chimneys do need cleaning."

The buttlinger buttled off.

"May I see them?" asked Sophronia politely.

Petunia arched a brow but passed over the tray. Sophronia pocketed the card for the chimney sweep, distracting her sister with, "How delightful that Agatha can stay! Shall we play loo? It's so very fortifying?"

Petunia pressed her temple with one hand. "I myself must rest. We shan't tell Mr. Hisselpenny of this evening's events, shall we, ladies? I'm afraid he is rather protective."

"Do not worry yourself on that account, sister. We shall be most discreet." *She's forgotten about the newspaperman. He, no doubt, will print a full report. Or perhaps Mr. Hisselpenny doesn't read the* Mooring

Standard. “We will calm ourselves with loo and lemonade.”

“Very good, ladies. Have the coach take Miss Woosmoss home when you’re done. I’ll bid you good night. And tomorrow…” Petunia brightened notably at a thought. “Tomorrow we shall go hat shopping.” She left without further discussion.

The three girls curled up by a fire in the parlor, cards out, of course, in case someone came to check on them, but they played by rote. Sophronia told them of her conversation with Madame Spetuna, and they spent some time debating where her loyalties might lie and why she might be unable to transfer information any other way than via Lord Akeldama.

“Although we must admit it worked.” Dimity was always one to give credit when due.

“The teachers won’t believe us. It’s such a crazy idea, war mechanicals. Too extreme.”

“They won’t *want* to believe us. Too scary.” Agatha showed unexpected insight.

A pause while they all looked morose.

Sophronia added, “She said something about her records—maybe there is a code word there that commands trust?”

“What else did we learn?” Dimity moved them on to other speculations, as she didn’t want to talk about the record room. It brought back bad—well, sticky—memories.

Agatha reported her observations. “The dewan used the explosion to push his agenda. He has something on the queen’s desk called the Clandestine Information Act. It’s designed to seize technological power for the Crown in the guise of patent control. I think he wants to persuade Lord Akeldama to this cause.”

“Speaking of which, did any of you learn anything more about that suspicious butler?” Sophronia asked.

“Administering a damp handkerchief will only get a young lady so far.” Agatha made a face.

“Me neither. But I think he had a vested interest in the politics of the situation.” Dimity wound a hair ribbon around and through her fingertips.

“Why?”

“He moved toward the dewan anytime he mentioned controlling technology.”

“Patent holder, perhaps?” Agatha had a brain under those red curls.

“A patent holder carrying at least two small guns, one up each sleeve?” Sophronia was suspicious.

“And a knife down his boot top.” Dimity flicked the hair ribbon.

“Careful with that—you’ll have an eye out.” Sophronia put up a hand defensively.

Agatha remained focused on the butler. “I noticed that, too. Assassin in the employment of a patent holder?”

“Speaking of butlers.” Sophronia drew out the calling card for the chimney sweep service. “If you will excuse me a moment? I believe there is someone waiting to speak with me outside.”

Agatha and Dimity squinted suspiciously, but let her go with only an exchange of teasing smooching noises.

After creeping around a well-guarded floating school, the Hisselpennys’ town house was ridiculously easy to escape, just as Soap had told her it should be.

Soap was waiting for her in the back alley by the kitchen delivery entrance.

Sophronia vibrated with awareness of him, but was careful not to show it. “Good evening.”

Soap was not so reticent. He moved in with supernatural speed, and before she could protest, nuzzled into the side of her neck in a wolfish manner. “Why do you always smell so tasty?”

In response, Sophronia sniffed him loudly, trying to lighten the mood. He no longer carried the scent of coal and boilers. He smelled of something raw and wild, a tiny bit like freshly butchered beef and open fields. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it wasn’t comforting, either. She had found coal dust and oil so reassuring—once.

A throat cleared. “Touching as this is, youngsters, there’s work to be done.”

Soap backed away and the dewan stepped out of the shadows.

Sophronia was mortified by the fact that she hadn’t noticed him there. Too much of her focus had been on Soap—how had he done that? She

curtsied exactly the right depth for the dewan's social superiority. He was, after all, landed as the Earl of Upper Slaughter, even if he couldn't boast an actual country seat.

"My lord, twice in one evening. To what do I owe the honor?" She tilted her head—to the degree of inquiry, not the degree of coquetry. It wasn't done to expose too much neck to werewolf or vampire.

"Now, now, little trickster, don't go throwing wiles in my direction." The dewan squinted at her.

Soap snaked an arm about Sophronia's waist and turned so that he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her.

The dewan gave him a sharp look. "Like that, is it?"

Soap blinked at him. "I have always been hers. Although she is taking her time accepting it."

"I didn't realize you were so tame, pup," replied the dewan, then dismissed it as unimportant with a wave of one massive hand.

Sophronia tried to delicately shrug away from Soap, but his arm only tightened. His statement had held so much finality it made her uncomfortable. How could she possibly combat such a feeling?

The dewan proceeded to grill Sophronia about her observations from the dinner party. She told him some of them. After all, he would be her patron eventually, and she had the sinking suspicion she might need his help in the days to come. He gave her little reaction, even when she spoke of his own agenda of trying to garner support for the Clandestine Information Act. His expression only changed when she mentioned the butler.

"Noticed him, did you?"

"Two guns and a knife? Of course I noticed."

The dewan gave a funny half growl, half snort. "He's with me. At least, I think he is, for now. I wouldn't concern yourself overly. He was once a valet to an enemy of the Empire. But his master is dead, and the butler, as you call him, has great cause to play nicely with queen and country."

Sophronia looked to Soap for further information. Soap's expression said he was as mystified as she.

"What is your plan, my lord? Let the Picklemen expose and bury themselves, then slap a law on them? That's a very indirect approach, for a werewolf."

The dewan looked her up and down. "Should I take that as a

compliment, coming from you, Miss Temminnick?"

"What if that's their plan, too? What if they are not intending an outright attack, but instead are trying to discredit you, the Shadow Council, and the entire supernatural set?"

"Queen Victoria would never allow it."

"And right now the general populace would never allow you to take their mechanicals away. But if the Picklemen cause one major nationwide malfunction, and blame it on a vampire vendetta, and then a Pickleman-backed manufacturer steps in and fixes everything? Then the supernatural are the villains and political power sways with popular opinion. So long as the papers spin it right."

"You think that is their game?" The dewan was intrigued.

"I think it's possible."

Soap said, "I told you her brain worked in mysterious ways."

Sophronia couldn't suppress a rush of pleasure. *He's been bragging about me to the dewan. How sweet.*

At least the dewan was considering her theory. Perhaps being indentured to him wouldn't be so bad, if he gave her opinions weight despite her age and sex.

Nevertheless, he disagreed. "I think it must be something less subtle. They have gone to a great deal of expense installing the new valves, which allow them to control every mechanical in the nation. They only need the right command center."

Sophronia got excited. "So Lord Akeldama's exploding mechanical *was* a pilot designed to seize control of military dirigibles?"

The dewan continued as if she hadn't interrupted, "That's a lot of pawns in place for a supernatural character assassination, even if the end result would be a shift in political power. What you suggest requires delicate maneuvering and hinges on controlling popular opinion and the press, both notoriously difficult to influence. I think it more likely that their planned assault is more violent."

Sophronia saw his reasoning. Of course, she liked her theory even if it didn't explain the exploding pilot. She must remain open-minded enough not to ignore evidence that came up to discredit her. It was best not to have an agenda in espionage.

"I will keep my ears and eyes open, my lord. I have never been able to

predict the duke's actions."

"The duke? You mean Golborne?"

Sophronia nodded.

"Ah, yes." The dewan looked at Soap, as if he had momentarily forgotten that the duke had been responsible for that fateful shot. "If I recall correctly, you had some doings with young Lord Mersey at one time."

Sophronia refused to blush. "Some, as you say, *doings*."

Soap tensed.

"Word is the duke's been elevated to Grand Gherkin. It is a significant position of power for such a disturbingly petty individual. There's only one Pickleman higher—the Chutney himself."

"As you say, my lord." Sophronia wanted to inquire further, but the dewan was speaking to her as if she should know all the details of Pickleman infrastructure. She didn't want to display ignorance when he was treating her so fairly.

"Perhaps young Mersey would be useful in this matter. Do you think he might be privy to his father's plans?"

Sophronia thought back to the recent ball. "I'm afraid that bridge may have been burned, my lord."

"Now, now. Pretty young thing like you? I highly doubt it."

Soap's arm left her waist. Sophronia felt the cold of its absence. She could see the dewan's reasoning. And, frankly, it would be a good test of her seduction ability. Could she win Felix back, on her own terms, knowing her affections lay elsewhere? *A challenge.* She did love a challenge. "I want it clear that I'm doing it because I'm curious—not because you've instructed me. You don't hold my indenture yet. But I will try Lord Mersey for information."

Soap growled. Actually growled!

Before Sophronia could get huffy about possessiveness, the dewan interceded. "Now, now, pup, remember what we discussed earlier. Controlling the wolf's emotions for civilized discourse is a requirement. Miss Temminnick here is planning on employing her intelligencer training in response to a specific target. It has no bearing on your"—his lip curled—"*relationship* with the chit. Whatever that may be."

Sophronia felt compelled to say something. "Really, my lord, why do you think we—?"

His snort cut her off. Strangely, Sophronia got the impression he was on Soap's side, that he, of all people, might support affection between a clandestine black werewolf and a young lady of quality.

She turned to Soap for understanding. Only to find that she'd momentarily forgotten how tall he was and how satiny his skin. She shifted in close against him. Employing affection was also part of her training.

Soap winced. "Don't."

Sophronia felt a pang of guilt, pulling away. *What kind of person have I become, that I chase information even though it may hurt those I adore? I've become so guarded, even with people I love.* She shook herself internally. "And while I do that, what exactly is your plan, my lord?"

"To stop them. Whatever it is they are going to do with those valves, I'm putting an end to it before it happens."

"And if you can't? What's your contingency plan?"

The dewan looked militant. "They will be stopped. That is all you need know."

Perhaps I have to be the one to develop a contingency plan. Sophronia wondered if Madame Spetuna was heading back to nest once more among the Picklemen and flywaymen.

"It's getting late." The dewan did not want to talk further. "I'd best get this one home before dawn. Make your good-byes, younglings."

Soap turned swiftly and kissed her, before she could protest.

His lips were soft and warm. He tasted different. Richer, like brown-butter sauce. More threatening, also. She probably liked that fact too much. Although she found herself grateful that it was the new moon—the safest time for a girl to be kissed by a werewolf.

Soap broke it off before she was ready, leaving her dissatisfied and annoyed with her own weakness. She had to remind herself again how impossible such a relationship would be—they'd be mocked and ostracized by everyone.

The look in Soap's eye said he, too, wanted more, but that was the point. If Sophronia were ever fully satisfied, she'd be bored, or dead. Soap was inclined to use that character trait to his advantage.

Because they both knew it, Sophronia headed back into the house without another word.

"Wait."

She turned at the door, and the dewan tossed something at her. Training kicked in and she suppressed the instinct to dive out of danger, catching it instead. It was a large velvet sack, well padded, and it thunked into her, heavy with the weight of something metal. She loosened the drawstring.

Tick-tock, tick-tock! went the sack.

“Bumbersnoot!”

“You shouldn’t leave your mechanimal lying about all willy-nilly like that, young lady. Any werewolf could have tripped over him,” said the dewan.

Soap chuckled.

And they were gone.

Sophronia envied them their speed and silence. The right werewolf, she thought, could make for a very accomplished spy.

Records and Regrets

The remainder of their London visit was uneventful. There were other dinner parties and shopping trips but no explosions and no revelations, if one discounted Agatha's realizing, finally, that orange was not a good color for her. This, Dimity and Sophronia felt, was an epiphany of epic proportions but of little consequence to the fate of the Empire at large.

They made their good-byes with the utmost gravity. Dimity and Agatha thanked Petunia profusely for her hospitality. Dimity presented her with a bunch of hothouse blooms entirely to Petunia's taste. Agatha pressed Petunia's hand and assured her that Mr. Woosmoss would call upon Mr. Hisselpenny on a matter of business come the New Year. Everyone parted ways feeling the better for the visitation.

The young ladies repaired to their respective families for the holidays, declaring their London jaunt an unparalleled success. They each had several new dresses, not to mention hats, gloves, shawls, and boots. Petunia was in raptures over their pleasant company, pleasing manners, and polite talk. A delusion which they considered a profound victory for espionage.

Sophronia enjoyed life back home with her family, grown only larger with married siblings now producing families of their own. But hers was a modest enjoyment. Conversation seemed provincial and limited in scope. Three days was more than enough mundanities. She was delighted when Agatha rolled up in her father's landau, having arranged to be their transport back to school.

Sophronia was permitted to give Agatha tea in the front parlor while the

luggage was loaded. Presumably Petunia had told Mrs. Temminnick of Agatha's wealth and station. Such a privilege as being accorded privacy in the Temminnick household was unprecedented.

"Was your Christmas perfectly ghastly?" asked Sophronia, all sympathy after the niceties had been dispensed with and the first cups quaffed.

"Tolerably so. I envy you your massive family, Sophronia. I should dearly love to be out of the spotlight and forgotten on occasion."

"I don't know. My mother thinks more on her cats these days than me. When we were called in for Christmas dinner, she forgot to yell my name entirely. Not that I mind as such—before Mademoiselle Geraldine's my name was all too often yelled."

"Better to be forgotten than the focus of all your father's hopes and dreams."

"You have a point. It is a valuable thing for an intelligencer to be forgotten."

"Oh, I do wish I had a brother. Or had been born a man."

Sophronia reached across the sofa to squeeze her friend's hand. "Oh, Agatha, I'm sorry. Is he still making demands?"

"He wants to know why my marks aren't better. Why I don't speak fluent French. Why I can't kill a fully grown man with a nutcracker."

Their privacy was not to last, for the twins clattered in, yodeling excitedly and heralding the arrival of another coach.

Sophronia and Agatha finished the dregs of their tea, kidnapped the crumpets for the journey ahead, collected the last of their belongings, and rushed out to the courtyard.

It proved to be Dimity and Pillover in a hired hack. The Plumleigh-Teignmotts tumbled out with all appearances of having argued vociferously most of the way.

Since Mrs. Temminnick was otherwise occupied, Petunia saw them all situated and gave the coachman instructions to Swiffle-on-Exe with no little pride. She didn't object to Pillover's presence, although by rights he ought not to be left alone with the girls. They'd formed a wary friendship at Petunia's coming-out ball, and she still looked upon him with favor.

"Whoever knew I should grow myself a sensible sister, in the end?" Sophronia settled back against the plush cushions of the carriage. "Do you think it has something to do with the fact that she is increasing?"

Agatha gasped, gesturing to Pillover.

Dimity came to Sophronia's defense. "Oh, Agatha, he knows where children come from."

"Yes, but…" Agatha squeaked.

Dimity moved them on for Agatha's sake. "I should have preferred a sister like yours, Sophronia, rather than old Pill."

Sophronia protested, "He's not so bad. Petunia took a long time to grow a brain. Pillover has had one all along."

"Thank you for that," muttered Pillover from under his hat. He was slouched in the corner next to his sister. His chin was sunk into his cravat and his attention fixed on a small book of Latin verse. Occasionally, he popped a lemon fizzy sweet into his mouth.

"He's a dead codfish." Dimity wrinkled her nose at the fish in question.

At which Pillover gave every outward appearance of intending to ignore them all for the duration of the journey, although he did sneak a few glances in Agatha's direction.

Bumbersnoot, who had some minor appreciation for Latin verse, sat on one of Pillover's feet. Pillover fed him bits of brown paper from the sweets wrapper.

"The ladies seem to like him." Sophronia spoke simply to see whether Pillover would react.

Pillover flinched.

"One of the great mysteries of the universe. Like why anyone would eat cucumber." Dimity had firm opinions on cucumber, which she felt was nothing more than slimy, embarrassingly shaped water and should never, under any circumstances, be presented at table.

Sophronia moved the conversation on to young men of Dimity's acquaintance, and which of them might prove a suitable beau. Lord Dingleproops having been long since discarded, there were other prospects to discuss.

Pillover muttered translations down at Bumbersnoot. The mechanimal paid rapt attention.

Sophronia did not mention Soap. She kept silent about his kisses, even knowing the others might benefit from her experience, but she was both mortified and exhilarated by the memory. She did not want her friends to know, fearing their disgust or worse, pity. Her own feelings were conflicted

enough—no need to add theirs to the mix. *I have a secret lover*, she thought. She experienced no little relish over the secrecy part, it must be admitted. It made her feel wise and bold, and better able to advise Dimity on her romantic choices.

Fortunately, Dimity could talk about her beaux, or lack thereof, for the entirety of a carriage ride. The Picklemen and the flywaymen and their valves were only briefly addressed. Pillover bestirred himself to participate in that part of the conversation. But even an insider from Bunson's couldn't add to their knowledge. Perhaps because it was Pillover—as insiders went, he never got very far in, as it were.

"We really must wait for the Picklemen to move first." Sophronia was not happy about this.

Dimity steered them quickly back to boys, for who could be bothered trying to save the nation from an amorphous threat when flirting was on the line?

A Christmas card addressed to Miss Temminnick, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, and Miss Woosmoss was waiting in their shared parlor at Mademoiselle Geraldine's. In and of itself that was rather charming, as so few people thought—or even knew—of them as a collective. However, this particular card was from Sidheag, which made it all the more delightful. Not that Sidheag was a great wit, or a particularly talented correspondent, but it was nice to hear from her. Once the staunch fourth member of their little band, Lady Kingair was home in Scotland, with her pack and her affianced, preparing to leave the country on what looked to be a protracted campaign in the Crimea. The card said nothing of consequence—mainly pleasant banalities. It also had little of import encoded. After all, Sidheag knew the teachers read their mail, the same teachers who had taught them how to code. But it was nice to know she was well, and her acerbic nature translated into an aggressive script, for all her prose stuck to the strictures of politeness. Sidheag hadn't stayed long at Mademoiselle Geraldine's, but she had taken some lessons to heart, in the arena of letter writing at least.

"She's happier there." Agatha's tone was sad. Sidheag had been her closest friend.

“How do you think things are with Captain Niall?” Dimity wondered.

“Difficult to tell. It’s not as if she would write that down.” Sophronia and Sidheag shared a dislike of discussing romance.

She gave Dimity a glance of inquiry over Agatha’s bowed head.

Dimity inclined her chin in approval.

“Agatha, would you like to keep the letter?” said Sophronia.

“Oh, may I? You don’t mind?”

“Of course not.” Dimity’s smile was warm. Then she glanced down at her necklace timepiece. “Oh, goodness, we have to be in the kitchens in five minutes!”

They had various new lessons, but by far the oddest was, of all things, cooking. Why a respectable female of good standing might need to *cook*, aside from the occasional poison, was a great mystery. But one did not question Professor Lefoux’s orders. Chopping onions was the worst part, until Dimity discovered one could use floating goggles to good effect. Professor Lefoux was surprised out of her customary dour expression upon finding them attentive to the onions, garbed as if for a flywayman attack.

“Innovative” was her only comment.

With only a week before the New Year’s tea party, the teachers were determined to get the girls back in form quickly. Parties were the best place to practice the art of espionage—holidays, shopping, and Christmas presents notwithstanding. Mademoiselle Geraldine’s young ladies of quality were not allowed to be distracted by *anything*.

Sophronia tried to deliver Madame Spetuna’s warning to Lady Linette, who was having none of it. “I fail to see why you would make up such a falsehood! How on earth would she be in London? Why reach out to you with such an outlandish story after cutting off contact for all this time? Why send proof to Lord Akeldama and not us? Absurd.”

“But—”

“Silence. Nothing more on the subject!”

After that Lady Linette watched like a hunting hound, and Sophronia could do nothing but apply herself diligently to the routine of classes. She couldn’t shake a feeling of suspension. It was as if she were hanging over an abyss. Any move she made might do more harm than good, and someone might come along at any moment and cut her safety line. She became convinced of, even obsessed with, the fact that Madame Spetuna was their

only hope. She was their only contact on the inside.

“It’s so frustrating!” she whinged over tea. “Why won’t Lady Linette even entertain the idea?”

“Why is it you’re good at so many aspects of espionage except the waiting?” Agatha nibbled a bit of orange pound cake.

Dimity answered that. “Because she likes to be in motion. Haven’t you noticed? Our Sophronia is happiest when she is crawling over or swinging around something. Preferably a *something* that is large and in motion itself.”

“But Lady Linette always says an intelligencer needs patience. And Sophronia is supposed to be one of the best.”

“Maybe because I’ve managed to hide that flaw in my character?” suggested Sophronia. “No, I’ve left it long enough. She hinted at something in the record room that might make Lady Linette believe me. It’s time to break into it.”

“Again?” wailed Dimity. “It destroyed a perfectly lovely dress last time.”

“Come on, it’ll be diverting.” Sophronia’s green eyes lit up with excitement.

“Anyone ever taken you to task for a perfectly horrid idea of diversion?”

“Agatha, you in?” Sophronia turned to the redhead.

Agatha sighed. “I’d rather not. I do prefer sleeping.”

“Dimity?”

“It’s not worth the risk. The New Year’s tea party is too close. You know if we’re caught we’ll be sent down and miss the event. You’ll have to do this one on your own.”

Sophronia grinned. “Tonight, I think, an hour before dawn.”

Agatha was true to her word, but Dimity, of course, ended up coming along. It was too juicy a gossip prospect. While Sophronia was busy looking up Madame Spetuna’s record, Dimity could look up the records of their classmates.

Last time they visited the record room, it had been protected by a soldier mechanical of a viciously viscous inclination. But when they approached the door this time, there was nothing more threatening waiting for them than a folding card table and three small chairs stacked haphazardly against the outside. The furniture looked to have been abandoned. The hallway was

eerily empty and free of mechanicals.

The sign was still on the door saying RECORD ROOM—CONTAINING RECORDS OF IMPORT in big gold letters. Underneath, someone had pinned an embroidery sample that read DANGER, MISINTERPRETATION HAZARD. The two girls used every door exam in their repertoire, and there seemed to be no trap. Nevertheless, Sophronia picked the locks with a slow, steady caution that tried even Dimity's patience.

Sophronia could take her time under some circumstances, it appeared.

They swung the door open but did not enter immediately, peering inside from a body length away, to be safe.

The room was entirely unchanged. Machines and rotary belts ran along the walls and filled the corners. Thousands of records dangled above, clipped to conveyors mounted on the ceiling, like laundry hanging from a clothesline. The three desks, accompanied by leather seats, oil lamps, and writing pads, stood in exactly the same place they had last time. This was more disturbing than an army of soldier mechanical guards. It made no sense that after the room had been broken into, the teachers would respond by removing all security entirely.

Sophronia entered first. Dimity followed. They moved slowly, hands held cupped forward and down, in the position of modesty. Their backs were straight, their posture pristine. They were model examples of Geraldine's training—those hands were held in readiness, able to delve quickly into any one of a number of hidden pockets, to release wrist holsters, or to grab items dangling from chatelaines. The posture was one of anticipation, ready to move in any direction at the slightest provocation.

Sophronia's instinct was to fire the obstructor or draw her bladed fan.

Dimity had taken recently to a pearl-handled muff-pistol. Not precisely deadly but, as she put it, terribly cute. It was half out of its holster as she took one more dainty step into the room.

Nothing happened. All the machinery remained still and silent, the steam supply asleep along with the boilers down below. It would be loud to activate, but there was no other way to get at the right record. It had taken them some twenty minutes to get to the record room, using the quickest routes and the obstructor. Sophronia guessed the teachers would take about the same to catch them once the noise started.

“Dimity,” she whispered. “I’m going to have to turn it on. Can you keep a twenty-minute time check? Warn me at five?”

“I don’t do well with timing.” Nevertheless, Dimity pulled up her necklace watch, getting ready to give the start signal.

Each desk boasted a brass knob with a lever sticking out the top, around the base of which was a large circular piece of parchment paper with writing on it. One could dial in a record using names at one desk, locations at another, and skill sets at the third.

Sophronia moved to the name desk. She did not know Madame Spetuna’s real name. She had to hope that the file could also be found under her alias.

At Dimity’s nod, she pushed the lever toward the letter *S*. The machinery of the record room came to life with an enormous clatter, made all the louder by the unnatural stillness that had preceded it. The whoosh of heat, the hiss of steam, and the great rattle of gears, pistons, and rotary mechanisms were enough to wake even Sister Mattie. They were sure to alert Professor Braithwope. Crazy he might be, but there was nothing wrong with his supernatural hearing. And he, at least, would still be up.

The records shifted from one part of the room to another, parting and regrouping. They whizzed around in a ballet of organization. A large cluster drifted in Sophronia’s direction, stopping directly above her desk. She pressed down hard on the brass nodule and, with a loud clunk, the records dropped to eye level.

She flipped through them quickly, but none was labeled with the name Madame Spetuna. She swore and racked her brain for a clue, a memory, anything that might indicate more about the intelligencer whom she had known only by disguise. In their brief acquaintance, Madame Spetuna had gone from elderly fortune-teller to flywayman to Pickleman associate. She had appeared shipboard, borrowed Bumbersnoot, and reappeared in the heart of a vampire hive. Hers had been the assignment to read the pillows embroidered by an intelligencer in Westminster Hive, a girl who had been killed because Madame Spetuna had neglected her in favor of infiltrating the Pickleman operation.

I wonder, thought Sophronia, *what happens to those of us who disobey orders? I wonder what happens to young lady intelligencers who run away or join the enemy? There must be a record of sinners against the school.*

That would explain Lady Linette's anger, if she thought Madame Spetuna had stopped communicating because she was a traitor.

She moved to the desk that dialed in locations. "Dimity, what would you label an intelligencer who turned bad? Or who went missing while under cover?"

Dimity ran to take her place and dialed in a name. While the records moved, she glanced at her necklace watch. "Ten minutes left. What would I label a traitor in code, you mean?"

"Yes, exactly. *Traitor* is for governments, *deserter* is for armies. What is it for us?"

"Carelessness." Dimity unclipped and read a record. She grinned over it and then returned it to its spot and dialed in another name.

Our head teacher would indeed think it careless to have misplaced an intelligencer. Sophronia dialed in the word *lost* to the location desk.

Records sped toward her. There were more than Sophronia had expected —a dozen at least. It made her nervous. *Lady Linette has indeed been careless.*

"Seven minutes!" Dimity was dialing in another name furiously. Sophronia didn't object—Dimity was entitled to her curiosity so long as she kept an eye to the time.

And then, there it was, the very last record, the most recent file.

Madame Spetuna was listed as an alias, and the intelligencer's real name was at the top: *Lavish Vivita.* Two decades she'd been in service, indentured to the school and farmed out, occasionally, to the potentate. Her record was one of consistent results through established identities, and Madame Spetuna was considered her most successful guise. There was an entry about becoming a flywayman. After that came mention of her using initiative, in the form of a mechanimal, to break into the Picklemen's inner circle.

There was a note at the bottom of her file, dated three months ago. *Miss Vivita is missing, presumed lost.* But there was no code, nothing that might help Sophronia persuade Lady Linette.

It was disappointing, and not only because it was of so little help. Something about it spoke to the disinterested nature of the use of intelligencers. *As if we are disposable.* Sophronia shuddered.

"Time!" Dimity ran over.

Sophronia flipped the file closed and pinned it back up. She dialed to a random location in the West Midlands, hoping Dimity had done the same with names. There was no way to disguise the fact that someone had broken in and activated the record room, but there was no need for anyone to know which files had been viewed.

"Scurry!" said Sophronia.

They ran out the door. Only to find Lady Linette, Professor Lefoux, and Professor Braithwope sitting in the hallway outside, playing cards.

"Ah, Miss Temminnick, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott, what a surprise." Lady Linette put down her cards. "Do come over."

Professor Lefoux and Professor Braithwope continued playing, not glancing up. The vampire's mustache was in place and intact for once, waxed slightly at the tips into points of discipline. He appeared smugly pleased with his hand and not dangerous at all.

Sophronia and Dimity exchanged a look and then submissively walked to stand before Lady Linette. They both bowed their heads and crossed hands before them in the simulated meek—but actually ready for anything—position.

Lady Linette turned in her chair and showed them her hand. "Not bad, no?"

The girls looked at her and then at the others in the game. They said nothing. *Discuss someone's cards? Never.*

Lady Linette sighed. "Wait a moment, please, ladies, while we play through."

The girls waited.

Lady Linette was an odd sort of person. She was theatrically pretty, with a nice figure, modulated voice, and propensity for lavender scent. Her hair was blonde by artifice, not nature, and curled by iron, not heritage. She favored the pastel-colored gowns of a girl in her first season. Yet her face paint was applied to such excess she looked older than she actually was. Everything about her was a trick of expectation, making the truth impossible to wheedle out. Given that manipulation was one of Lady Linette's specialties, it was probably all by intelligent design in the end.

The game was some form of whist, except with three players. After another round, Lady Linette bowed out of the match. The other two continued.

Lady Linette piled her cards neatly, facedown. “You’ll have to be punished, of course. Imagine, allowing yourselves to be caught.”

Dimity’s eyes began to well with tears.

Sophronia stood firm. There was no point in defending herself. Lady Linette hadn’t believed her before and she wouldn’t now, not if she thought Madame Spetuna a traitor. Then, horribly, Sophronia wondered if Madame Spetuna *was* a traitor. Was all this some kind of setup? Was the dinner party at Lord Akeldama’s designed to lead them astray? Her mind whirred with the possibility.

“You’ll be forbidden to attend the upcoming New Year’s celebration.”

“Sent down?” wailed Dimity.

“No, I think *not* sent down. We will put you in charge of Professor Braithwope for the evening. That way Professor Lefoux can attend the festivities, for a change. We will make certain he is well fed beforehand, of course. You’ll be responsible for his entertainment and safety. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Professor?”

The vampire gave a glassy, disorientated fanged smile at the sound of his name.

Dimity looked scared.

Sophronia was resigned.

Professor Lefoux didn’t flinch at all, although Sophronia was tolerably certain she didn’t give two figs for attending the New Year’s party. Professor Braithwope returned to his hand, giving little indication of following the conversation.

“Report to his private chambers one hour before the event begins. Bring cards and snacks. Oh, and carnations. Of late, Professor Braithwope has developed a love of green carnations.”

Dimity and Sophronia flinched. Where would they find green carnations floating over Dartmoor?

However, they knew better than to question orders when being punished.

“Dismissed!” Lady Linette turned back to the game.

Sophronia and Dimity skittered away feeling foolish and disheartened.

Dimity cast herself dramatically on the couch in the parlor when they returned to their chambers. It was very late and they ought to be in bed, but such a calamity as this must be discussed immediately. “I told you we’d be tea party embargoed. Oh, the tragedy of it all!”

Sophronia said, “That was odd.”

“No, it wasn’t odd at all. It was exactly what I said would happen.” Dimity’s irritation presented itself as aggressively removing hairpins and then winding them together into a metallic nest. Her liberated curls developed wisps, making her look like a mad hermit—a sparkly mad hermit.

“No, not *that*. What’s odd was when Lady Linette asked us what we were looking for in the record room.”

“I missed that bit.”

“Exactly! Sometimes the most important piece of information is the chunk left out of the conversation.” Sophronia singsonged the sentence in a fine imitation of Professor Lefoux’s perfect elocution.

“Oh.” Dimity put down her hairpin nest, interested despite her annoyance. “You think she knew what we were looking for?”

“Or the school has some kind of new technology that allows them to track what files we examined. Invisible powder? Feel anything on your fingertips?”

“No.”

“Me neither. Then again…” Sophronia trailed off, biting her lip.

“Then again *what*?”

“It’s possible they knew what we were after and planted false information for us to find.”

“Could this be a lesson? Do they want us to figure that out?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it wasn’t us they were expecting, not really.”

“Lady Linette said she wasn’t surprised.”

“Lady Linette is the mistress of misdirection, remember?”

Dimity flopped back. “Sometimes I hate this place. Wouldn’t you like it if just once everything was exactly as it seemed?”

“No, that’s a horrible idea.”

“You *would* say that. So what did you learn, misinformation or no?”

“Madame Spetuna’s real name, and that she is missing, presumed lost to evil. That Lady Linette may think her a traitor, which is why she won’t

believe me. Or that she really is a traitor. In either case, I wager she is back with the Picklemen. And you? Whose files did you look at?"

Dimity sat up, gossip in the offing. "Yours, mine, Monique's, and Agatha's. You know Sidheag's is gone? Vanished. Wonder where they file those ones—you know, the students who got away."

"Possibly also with the lost. Anything juicy?"

"Not in mine, except they actually think I'm better than I think I am. Which is nice."

"But not a surprise, Dimity. Most of us think that."

Dimity blushed with pleasure. "Why, thank you. Monique's says a lot about her hive. When the school punished her by not allowing her to finish, they removed her from the viable intelligencer roster but kept her record in play. I guess she has enough training to remain in the game." Dimity knew Sophronia desperately wanted to hear about the Sophronia file. Of course, Dimity saved it purposefully for last.

Little drama-monger. Sophronia let her have her fun. After all, she felt guilty about getting them caught.

"Agatha's was interesting."

"How so?"

"Terribly fat. You know her father is in all sorts of pies?"

Sophronia had a vision of an older male version of Agatha with his head sticking out of a shepherd's pie, as if he were bathing in it. She snorted a laugh.

Dimity corrected herself without pause. "Well, his fingers are. And Agatha has met Lord Akeldama before, several times. They've had *dealings*."

"There was no indication of that at his dinner party."

"I know. And there's a note that says they think she's running a long-form field operation."

"Agatha? Really? On whom? Her family?"

"Didn't specify. Could be on the school. Could be on us, I suppose. But there you have it."

Sophronia frowned. She could hardly believe it. Agatha wasn't that good. Or was she? Sophronia shook her head. She didn't want to start mistrusting her dearest friends. Down that road lay a madness as horrible as Professor Braithwope's. She was already doubting Madame Spetuna.

“Could we ask her about it?” Dimity was cautious.

“We could. But at what risk? Would we lose her friendship through suspicion? Or truth?”

Dimity stood up. “I’m for bed. This has been an eventful evening.”

“Dimity?”

“Yes, Sophronia?” Dimity’s tone was very arch indeed.

Sophronia made herself sound as humble as possible. “I apologize for getting you into trouble this evening.”

“Apology accepted. And?”

“You were right about the punishment being us missing the ball.”

“Very good. And?”

“I shouldn’t have been so impulsive as to plan this action without researching the target first.”

“True. And?”

“Will you please tell me what was in *my* file?”

“Since you ask so nicely. It was pretty much what might be expected. The fact that you are a covert recruit is at the top. There’s a note that you’d make a good independent intelligencer and they recommend against marriage right away—unless you net yourself one of the princes or a high-up Pickleman. A prince of the blood, said the note, seems unlikely. They know Lord Akeldama offered for patronage. Your seduction marks are low. I guess they don’t know about Soap, do they, Sophronia?”

Sophronia gasped. “Really, Dimity, I say.”

Dimity was smug. “That would make you similar to Madame Spetuna, as an operative, I guess.”

Sophronia was disappointed. She already knew all that—or at least suspected it. The recommendation for independent action in the field was nice. Most girls finished by coming out and being married into a position of power, the better to uncover information and manipulate society. Most would marry multiple times. It was an odd compliment to be thought capable of something different. It was also an insult to her seductive powers.

“That’s it?” Sophronia pressed.

“That’s about all.” Dimity was holding something significant in reserve.

“Dimity, please?” It was like convincing a cow to lay eggs.

Dimity relented at last. “They know you made a promise to indenture to

the dewan."

"What?"

"It says, right at the end of the file. No comment on how they know, who told them, or whether it's considered a positive. But they do know."

"I'm an idiot to think I have any secrets."

Dimity only looked more smug.

"Go to bed, do," ordered Sophronia.

Dimity laughed and went, but they both knew who had won that round.

Sophronia repaired to her room to find Bumbersnoot waiting for her.

Agatha had clearly been playing with him. He had one of her lace tucks tied about his head, like a jaunty tiara.

Sophronia picked him up for a cuddle. Not that a metal dog was the best cuddler, being hard, oily, ashy, and hot. But it made her feel better.

She put him on the foot of the bed, washed her face and hands, and slipped into her nightgown. She climbed under the covers, tucking her feet under her mechanimal for warmth, and tried to sleep. *If it's in my record that I promised the dewan, then Lady Linette has been told by someone.* She listed the possibilities: Dimity, Agatha, Soap, Captain Niall, or the dewan himself. Of the five, she was absolutely certain of only one person's loyalty —Soap.

She missed him so much it actually hurt.

Tea Embargo

New Year's Eve dawned damp and disgruntled, a soggy tea towel of a day. But by noon the rain had turned to mist, and by sunset it looked like there might be a clear sky over the evening festivities. The girls were delighted. Rain would keep them all inside the dining hall, but clear skies meant the squeak decks were open territory, and teachers could only chaperone so many couples at once. Mademoiselle Geraldine, proverbial apple cart almost overset by her heavy breathing, issued strict instructions that they were to avoid *tête-à-têtes*. But while the headmistress didn't know this was a school of espionage, the other teachers did, and were looking at a long night of tea-related canoodling. Professor Lefoux was positively dour at the prospect.

As the moon, almost full, popped up over the horizon in a cheery manner, Mademoiselle Geraldine's girls glided into Swiffle-on-Exe to find the Bunson's boys all standing, waiting, with flowers and other appropriate offerings at the edge of the goat path. Of course, Dimity and Sophronia weren't waiting with the other ladies on the midship reception deck. But they did have good box seats. They watched it all from the comfort—it must be admitted the deck chairs were quite posh—of Professor Braithwope's private balcony.

"And so we glide in on the wisps of receding fog, emerging out of the white with the rays of the dying sun highlighting all our puffy majesty." Dimity was moved by loss to muttering poetic twaddle.

"Don't be ridiculous." Sophronia would have none of it. "We are a

chubby caterpillar with delusions of balloon grandeur."

Forbidden to attend, they were nevertheless dressed for the festivities. Even Professor Braithwope had rediscovered a measure of his old dapper nature in a suit of deep-purple velvet with a lavender brocade vest and purple cravat. He sat, docile, between the two young ladies, knitting what looked like a tea cozy in the shape of a hedgehog. Bumbersnoot, wearing a black cravat, lounged happily at their feet. Occasionally he wuffed at Professor Braithwope's yarn basket but so far showed no inclination to nibble it.

"Sophronia, hush. I'm enjoying wallowing in a maudlin humor."

"Apologies, Dimity. Do carry on."

They watched the sooties crank down the massive staircase. Billowing steam wafted up. The young ladies milled about in excited agitation.

"There they all are." Dimity was very good at wallowing. "Like colorful fruit being steamed for the pudding course. I should have so liked to be a piece of fruit on that table."

"What kind?"

"A peach, of course."

"Of course." Sophronia privately felt Dimity more of the gooseberry fool at the moment.

Dimity had optimistic plans to sneak off and visit the party, or at least one edge of it where Lady Linette and Professor Lefoux might not notice her. Dimity was never one to miss an event where tea cakes were on the line. Sophronia intended to try as well—after all, she was under orders to get information out of Felix. She couldn't very well do that while on vampire nanny duty. Thus both young ladies had dressed in their best gowns. It must be admitted that their attire pushed the edge between ball and dinner dress, but since they didn't have to pass any kind of inspection, they had both taken risks. Or, more to the point, Dimity had taken a risk and chivvied Sophronia into doing the same.

Sophronia self-consciously tucked her shawl around her shoulders. Perhaps she had taken *too much* of a risk.

Dimity caught her at it.

"Stop twitching."

"I'm cold," protested Sophronia, worried over the expanse of chest she was displaying.

“Rubbish.” Dimity’s dress was equally low cut, but, as she put it, she hadn’t been blessed with Sophronia’s turnips. Admittedly, when compared with Agatha or Mademoiselle Geraldine, even Sophronia was a mere radish, but the dress she had on exposed everything but the tips, so to speak.

Dimity’s gown was peach silk with multiple pleats about the neckline ending in scalloped lace. There was a black bow at the waist, as well as one on each shoulder. It was actually quite elegant. She had accentuated the simplicity with jet jewelry, black gloves, and black slippers. Normally, jet was only for those in mourning, but it was an ingenious pairing. All that black against the peach of her dress and skin made Dimity looked pretty *and* wealthy.

Sophronia’s dress was very sophisticated, possibly overly so. She could hardly believe Petunia had purchased it for her. Sophronia had objected at the time to its being too grown-up. But her sister, who might have been cautious had Sophronia liked it, had advocated heavily once she saw how afraid Sophronia was of the cut. It had no ruffles, no pleats, no lace—nothing but a fitted bodice and a full skirt. Nothing to hide any sins of the figure. The fabric was what made it shine, a vibrant red with black brocade flowers. The short sleeves did end in tiny puffs, but that was it, except, of course, for the extremely low neckline. It was better suited to a lady twice her age and firmly married. However, Dimity thought they might as well go all in, as they expected few would actually see them. And Sophronia felt that if she was to wheedle information out of Felix, this dress was the best help she could get.

They watched the young men board, picking out their particular acquaintances. Lord Dingleproops was there with Lord Mersey and the rest of the Pistons. Pillover trailed reluctantly at the back of the crowd. Both girls were delighted to find he was attending. It pleased Dimity, mostly because she knew he would be miserable. It pleased Sophronia because Agatha had been so unhappy at having to go to the party without them.

They did not see Vieve among the attendees. *Has she gotten into trouble? Worse, has she been exposed as female?* Sophronia’s scalp prickled in fear. There was great reassurance in knowing Vieve was their inside agent at Bunson’s—not to mention her useful mechanical talent. If she had been compromised, they were all in trouble.

Professor Braithwope leaned forward as if only now noticing they had

visitors, his knitting needles continuing to click.

“What’s that, then? First course?”

“Fruit course.” Dimity grinned.

Sophronia shook her head slightly. “It’s a tea party, Professor. They are coming on board for the New Year’s event, remember?”

“Whoever heard of such a thing? One never serves schoolboys at a tea party. Too disruptive. Only the finest young ladies ought to be consumed, everyone knows that. Like yourselves. With a liver-and-egg butter sauce, of course.” The vampire regarded them each in turn, out of the corner of his eye. There was such a focus on their necks that even Dimity pulled up her shawl to cover the exposed flesh, although it conflicted with the much-vaunted neckline of her lovely gown.

“Pity.” The vampire returned focus to his knitting. “I’m not hungry for either, whot.”

The boys looked a treat. There wasn’t much leeway in the dress of a young man attending a tea party, so they were of a set. A few had gone to the pink, peaking up their collars and donning very tight and very loud plaid trousers and impossibly enormous cravats. These stood out among the rest like peacocks among the chickens. After all, Bunson’s was a school for evil geniuses, and scientists weren’t encouraged to experiment with fashion, only weaponry.

The boys having boarded and the staircase retracted, the school rose slightly. It wasn’t going to drift off for an hour yet, in case there were stragglers. With nothing left to see and the night turning chilly, Sophronia and Dimity prepared to chivvy the vampire indoors. It had taken them an age to get him outside in the first place, so they were ready for a battle.

“Come along, Professor, do,” wheedled Dimity.

The vampire jerked to his feet, head cocked. He sniffed. “Broiled monkey.”

“Later, Professor.” Sophronia opened the door for him.

A cough at their feet interrupted the coaxing.

Dimity squeaked as a small soot-covered face appeared by their toes. A sootie had climbed up to the bottom edge of the balcony and was peering at them through the rails.

Professor Braithwope looked down, his mustache quivering like a hound scenting the fox. “And this one comes to the table burned and dirty? I think

not. Fire the cook! What terrible presentation. Send it away and demand another, whot." With which he drifted sedately into his chambers.

Dimity assumed—quite rightly—that any lowbrow visitor must be for Sophronia. So she merely gave her friend a telling look, snatched up the vampire's knitting, and followed him inside.

"Yes, Handle?" Bumbersnoot tottered over to join Sophronia in looking down at their visitor. The little mechanimal seemed thrilled—rarely was anyone at his level. Perils of being a sausage dog, mechanical or no.

The sootie grinned up at Sophronia. "You look mighty fine this evening, miss. Mighty fine, indeed."

Sophronia clutched her shawl to her bosom, realizing it was horribly visible when she bent forward to talk. "Thank you kindly."

"You got yourself a visitor groundside. Old friend. Says he made the trip special and you might want to hurry."

Sophronia nodded. "Drift-off is in an hour?"

"That's orders, miss, as they stand now. You know the Uptops—could change at any moment, and we can't hold the ship for you. Not even in that dress."

Sophronia nodded.

"You wearing your sproingy?"

Sophronia fished her hurlie out of Bumbersnoot. There was just enough room to stash it and the obstructor inside him, what with Vieve's modifications. She couldn't wear them outright, they clashed with her dress. She strapped her hurlie on and considered the obstructor.

"Will this take long, do you think?"

"That's rather up to you and the visitor, miss."

"It had better not. I'm not dressed for this. You'll have to provide an assist? Up for it?"

"Of course, miss. My pleasure." No doubt he was thrilled by the opportunity to look down her dress the entire time. *Why did I listen to Dimity?*

Sophronia hooked the hurlie grapple on the edge of the balcony, hiked up her skirts—much to the sootie's delight—and climbed over the railing to drop next to him. She looked down to the ground directly below, and there, indeed, was a familiar figure, waiting patiently.

Her skin prickled in a much less fear-driven manner.

She kicked herself off to swing down and then in to catch a lower balcony. Handle unstrapped her hurlie from Professor Braithwope's balcony and dropped it to her. It was always easier to go *up* the outside of an airship. Usually, for down, Sophronia utilized stairs and hallways inside, but with help, this method was fastest.

She hooked and dropped again. Then had to wait while Handle climbed down and unhooked her. He had no hurlie, so his descent was all skill. Sophronia though he ought to be teaching the young ladies of Mademoiselle Geraldine's lessons on climbing. Then again, climbing was part of his job. In addition to feeding the boilers, it was sooties who ran the rigging and repaired the outside of the balloons.

She dropped to the lowest balcony, the level above engineering, and tried to estimate the remaining distance to the ground. *Should be fine.*

One last unhook, reel in, and hook again, and she dropped the final length. She dangled about one story up, but considering who was waiting for her, she figured he could give her a lift back when she needed it.

"Catch!" Sophronia unstrapped the hurlie from her wrist and let go, falling the remainder of the distance.

She landed in his arms, easy for a supernatural creature to catch someone her size. The poufy skirts added cushioning.

Dimity's head poked out over the balcony edge far above.

"Oh, really!" her friend yelled. "I leave you for five minutes to have a conversation and this happens? You are certifiably impossible." Her eyes widened as she took in Sophronia's position, wrapped in a gentleman's arms. "And a *strumpet*!"

"You chose this dress," Sophronia objected.

"Bunter!" said Dimity.

"I'll be quick, I promise." Sophronia was not worried about being overheard, as everyone was now inside at tea.

"Yes, I understand that's part of the strumpet's profession." Even Dimity could be crass on occasion.

Sophronia tried not to laugh. "Just keep him knitting!"

"Thank you for your sage advice." Dimity snorted loudly enough for Sophronia to hear, even on the ground. Or perhaps she imagined it, because she knew Dimity would snort.

Sophronia turned in Soap's arms to look shyly up into his dark eyes.

“You can put me down now.”

“No.” His smile was wide and his teeth were still startlingly white, but immortality had given them points where most humans had none.

Sophronia had always loved Soap’s smile, but now it was more predatory than comforting. Fortunately, the twinkle in his eyes was the same.

“Please?”

Soap pretended to consider her request and finally set her gently on her feet.

Sophronia took a moment to put herself in order, touching her hair and untucking and smoothing down her skirts.

Soap’s eyes widened into saucers at the cut of her gown. She swore she could hear his breath hitch. It was ridiculously satisfying. Then, annoyed with herself and the dress, she wrapped the shawl tightly ’round her chest. *I’m supposed to be putting a stop to Soap’s romantic notions, not be charmed that he finds me attractive*.

Caught up in reprimanding herself, she gave a startled squeak as he snatched her up into his arms once more, unbalancing and kissing her. No hesitation, no tentative touches, a full deep hungry kiss. It left her breathless and discombobulated, and even angrier at the dress.

“Soap, we really shouldn’t.” Sophronia pushed herself away.

Soap was panting a little. She was secretly delighted to find that he was just as affected as she. It would be horrible to be the only one.

“I thought, after what happened when I died, that you loved me.”

Sophronia winced and looked down at her hands. How to say anything to that without lies or heartbreak?

“Oh, I forgot. It makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t it? To talk of feelings. Romance.” Soap brightened.

Sophronia took the coward’s way out and switched topics. “What are you doing here? Is the dewan with you? Are you all right? Is he all right? Has something happened with the Pickleman situation?”

Soap answered, ticking questions off with his fingers. “I came because I wanted to see you. The dewan is not with me. I’m well. He’s well. The Pick __”

“Wait, he’s not *here*? But *Soap*, tomorrow is full moon!”

“I know that.”

“But you’re newly made! You can’t be parted from him at such a time, can you?”

“I’m tired of being attached to his apron strings.” Soap looked more out of temper than he should over such a sensible comment. She was only thinking of his safety. He was almost growling.

“Oh, sweet heaven. You’re not supposed to be here, are you? You came without permission. And you’re not yet in control of shift. How could you be so *stupid*? Where were you sleeping all day? You must have traveled to get here last night. Who guarded you?”

A small figure materialized out of the shadows and put up his hand. *No*, her *hand.* “Um, that would be me.” *Vieve.*

Sophronia turned her ire on the young inventor. “Do you *know* what an insane risk he’s taking?”

“Don’t get all grumpy with me, termagant. What was I to do? He turned up, it was dawn, I couldn’t very well send him packing after sunup, now could I? Even I know a young werewolf can get seriously damaged under such circumstances. So I stuck him in the bathhouse.”

“What?”

Vieve shrugged in that very French way of hers. “It’s a boys’ school. The bathhouse is rarely used. Then I figured you two could have your smooch, disgusting, by the way”—Sophronia supposed Vieve was too young to think of romance as anything but revolting—“and we could pack him off tonight none the worse for it.”

“Oh, did you?”

“Yoo-hoo, don’t I have a say in this conversation?” Soap had calmed while they bickered.

Sophronia turned on him. “Exactly why are you here *now*? And don’t prattle on about not being able to stay away from me. If that’s your real reason, you had better come up with an alternative or I shall box your ears, werewolf or no.”

Soap took a breath. “The Picklemen have one or more intelligencers infiltrating your school tonight. Disguised as Bunson’s students.”

“Impossible. Surely the professors would spot new boys.”

“They’ve been vouched for by a wealthy patron.”

“But why would the Picklemen want to attend our New Year’s party? It only a tea.”

“The dewan thinks it’s to gather information of some kind, that it’s not very important.”

Sophronia nodded. “You disagree with him?”

Soap went oddly flat. “A pup does not disagree with his Alpha. Not if he wants to escape discipline.”

Sophronia looked from him to Vieve. “What do they hope to accomplish?”

Vieve said, “They could be after a piece of technology, something of my aunt’s, perhaps. She’s not always”—a pause while she considered word options—“*safe* in her inventions.”

“They did visit once before.”

“They did? You didn’t tell us that,” said Soap.

“I don’t work for the dewan yet.”

“And what am I, chopped liver?” Soap paused. “Oh, chopped liver sounds tasty right about now.”

“Soap, you are his get. I’m not stupid.”

Soap looked hurt. “Does that mean you don’t trust me anymore?”

Sophronia paused—*did it?* “If I had told you of the first infiltration in confidence, would you have reported it to him?”

“Not if you asked me not to.”

“Well, it’s pointless to discuss now.”

“And yet it is in your nature to be dishonest, even with me.” He was angry.

Sophronia was hurt, especially given how hard she had been working not to have to lie to him about her feelings. By all rights she should simply tell Soap that she didn’t love him, send him away with no hope of any kind of future together. In the long run, that would be better for both of them. And she could do it, too. She had the training. *But I’d lose him entirely. He said there was no possibility of friendship. I’m weak,* thought Sophronia. *It is not the thought of Soap’s pain that keeps me silent, but of my own.*

So she said, “Why are you so upset? You are the one person whose loyalty I have never doubted.”

“That is *not* the same thing,” growled Soap.

Vieve was impatient. “Are you two having your first lovers’ spat? Right now? You realize your school is drifting?”

The dirigible had moved some distance away. Yet there was something

impossible to resist about their disagreement. Sophronia had never before wanted so much to be *right. How dare he expect me to simply tell him everything? It is my livelihood to be circumspect. Not to mention my nature. Does he want me to change? Does he want to limit me to his—or worse, the dewan's—expectations of a woman's place?* Those thoughts refused to be separated from her other worry. *How dangerous is it for him the night before full moon? And how much in danger is poor Vieve, forced into guarding him?* There was also guilt. He had risked everything to bring her this information, and yet she played close and tight with her own knowledge. She should have told him about the pilot's bubble. Shouldn't she?

"Trust is a lot to ask of someone," she said, finally.

"Exactly. I should think that I, at least, have earned your trust." Soap hunched his shoulders and lowered his voice. "Is that why you won't let me court you?"

Sophronia couldn't help her frustration. Why was he so willfully obtuse? "Oh, for goodness' sake, be reasonable. How could I? You are a newly made werewolf loner, secret pawn for a political player."

"And your soon-to-be patron."

"And so we marry and what happens? What world do you think we live in, Soap? What of my family, my friends, my position in society? Are you asking me to give them up?"

"Of course not!"

"So what courting do you propose?"

"I could be discreet."

"And you would be, what, my dirty little supernatural secret? I keep you boxed away and hidden along with my espionage activities?" Sophronia was moved to verbal indiscretion.

"Why not? You would be wonderful at it."

"Because you're better than that, Soap! We're better than that!" Sophronia didn't even know she felt it until she yelled it.

"So you *do* love me."

Sophronia lost her anger on a breath of air and crumpled into sadness. "It doesn't change the state of society."

He reached for her and she jerked back. "No."

Soap drew back. "I can wait."

“Don’t.”

This time it was Soap’s turn to flinch.

There was something wrong about his mouth. As though he were trying to swallow his own teeth, or was that canines? Was he starting to shift? She’d read somewhere that excess of emotion could affect the control of young werewolves, and the moon was almost full.

Soap hunched forward a little more. He seemed to be shivering.

“Soap! Are you unwell?” Vieve lurched forward. Sophronia had almost forgotten she was there. How embarrassing.

Soap’s teeth were beginning to extend. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But I think you both should run.” His hair was becoming very shaggy, as though it wanted to creep out of the tight curls and descend all over his body as fur. His ears looked like they were stretching slightly, and his eyes were turning from brown to gold.

Sophronia couldn’t help but back away.

Vieve, with casual grace, reached over one shoulder, pulled a blunderbuss from a strap on her back, pointed it at Soap, and shot.

“Wait, Vieve, what are you…?” Sophronia trailed off, for no massive silver bullet emerged. Instead the gun emitted a large mesh net, with weighted edges like a fisherman’s, that flew out into a wide arc, completely surrounding Soap.

“Ouch, that stings.” Soap looked like a disgruntled bride.

“Good.” Vieve was unsympathetic. “Now get ahold of yourself.”

“Yes, Captain.” Soap came over all meek.

Everything about him seemed to shiver and tighten, pulling in on itself. His hair went back to the tight black coils Sophronia was so fond of petting. His ears returned to their roundness, his eyes to their liquid brown.

“How do you feel?” Sophronia moved back to stand near, wanting to touch him through the net.

“Ashamed. Trapped.”

“Controlled, I hope.” Sophronia hid her worry.

“I think you should kiss him.” Vieve’s small face was grave.

“Thank you for the advice. It shall be recorded for posterity that you once encouraged public courtship.” Sophronia pretended outrage.

Vieve was offended. “No, silly. Wolves respond well to touch. His instinct for protection and preservation should kick in through concentrated

affectionate exposure. This might limit his capacity for shift under constraints of emotional surety."

Sophronia looked at Soap through the mesh veil. "I think she's speaking English, but I'm not convinced."

Soap laughed. "She thinks if we kiss it will control my desire to shift, convince my wolf side to see you as family, not food."

Sophronia considered. "And what do you think?"

"Can't hurt to try."

"Opportunist." Sophronia bent forward and kissed him, mostly because she wanted to. The cool metal of the mesh between their skin seemed to burn Soap, yet his lips were eager under the barrier.

Sophronia drew back.

"Also, you two need to make up." Vieve began coiling in the net, moving toward them as she did so, but ostentatiously looking away from the region of their mouths.

"Is it working?" Sophronia asked.

Soap closed his eyes, as though running an inventory of his internal organs. "Feels like."

Vieve looked to Sophronia. "Ready?"

Sophronia nodded.

Vieve whipped away the silver net and Sophronia stepped into Soap's arms. She pressed her lips to his again—for medicinal purposes only, of course. They embraced, perhaps with more urgency than passion, but it was firm and good.

When they parted, the anger was gone—from both of them.

"See?" Vieve was unbearably smug.

Meanwhile, the massive dirigible had drifted farther, and there were shouting heads peeking out of the hatch of engineering.

Sophronia went red as a beet. They had been observed!

She grabbed Soap by the hand. "Come on."

With Vieve following, they dashed after the airship. It probably looked ridiculous, the three small figures madly chasing a low-flying dirigible. Luckily, there wasn't much breeze that evening, a rare thing indeed on the moor, so they caught up to it easily.

"Can you lift me up?" Sophronia asked Soap.

"I could as a wolf, but it's too dangerous to shift now." He shook his

head regretfully. He whistled up three sharp toots and gave a birdlike caw and the sooties dropped down their old rope ladder.

"You coming too, old man?" Handle stuck his head out the hatch.

Soap smiled sadly. "Not anymore. I can't float, even if I wanted to."

"Gone on to bigger and fuzzier things, I hear."

"So they tell me."

"Don't you forget us when you get all over covered in high-and-mighty werewolf-type business, you hear?" ordered one of the other sooties.

"Never," replied Soap. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Before she could protest, Soap kissed her fiercely one last time and then tossed her upward.

Sophronia caught the end of the rope ladder and hoisted herself up, climbing easily, even with her massive skirts. Below, there came another pop as Vieve shot out her net. Once more it draped over Soap, like a veil in a Greek tragedy.

He didn't seem to be inclined to shift, but it was a sensible precaution.

"Come along," Sophronia heard Vieve say. "Let's get you to that bathhouse. This is getting ridiculous, you realize? What am I supposed to do with you tomorrow night? You'll be a full-on wolf whether you like it or not. Net or no. How do I hide a wolf in a bathhouse?" Sophronia was through the hatch at that point.

Vieve's lecture faded away.

Sophronia could only hope the dewan guessed Soap's location and came after. She was immensely grateful to Vieve—the small inventor had saved her and those she loved yet again.

The sooties were impressed by her dress. Sophronia put her humiliation aside to advocate for speedy travel to Professor Braithwope's quarters—with their assistance. They were only too pleased to help. Handle returned her abandoned hurlie.

Sophronia was up and over the vampire's balcony, brushing down her gown and patting her curls, less than an hour after she left. She'd made excellent time.

Dimity didn't see it that way. She was playing backgammon with Professor Braithwope and sipping a small glass of some illicit beverage. "Where *have* you been?"

“Sorry, I was needed groundside. Is that *sherry*?”

“You were fraternizing,” accused Dimity.

Sophronia was amazed at her powers of deduction. “How can you tell?”

Dimity looked smug. “Slightly bruised lips, spots of color on the cheeks, hair mussed. Who was it? Has Lord Mersey won himself back into your good graces?” Dimity was being purposefully obtuse. She wanted to squeeze a confession out of Sophronia.

“Hardly.”

“Oh, no, you haven’t found yourself another inappropriate sootie, have you?”

“No, it’s the same one, as you very well know.”

Dimity rolled her eyes. “Sophronia, I mean this quite kindly, but there is no possible future there. Quite apart from anything else, he has eternity and you do not. One way or another, you’re going to break that boy’s heart.”

“I know, and I told him as much.”

“Wars have been fought for less, whot.” They had almost forgotten that Professor Braithwope was there.

Dimity waved a hand at the vampire. “Thank you. Exactly my point, Professor. You talk some sense into her.”

The vampire leaned forward over the backgammon board, a serious expression on his pale face. His mustache drooped. “Whatever you do, do not pickle gherkins. Onions, yes. Gherkins, never.”

Sophronia nodded, lips twitching. “Certainly, Professor, very sage advice.”

“So you have ended things?” Dimity knew from experience that Sophronia was attached to Soap in a manner Dimity could never comprehend.

“I tried.” Strangely enough, saying that made Sophronia’s eyes prick with tears. “Dimity, I am so afraid. I…” She took a shaky breath. “I find myself struggling to be sensible about matters of the heart.”

Dimity instantly shifted to put a warm comforting arm about her. “Of course you do, my dear. We all have that struggle. I mean to say, look at me! I was driven to poetry by a Dingleproops! You haven’t fallen that far, have you?”

Sophronia sniffed. “No.”

“Well, then, that’s something to be proud of, now, isn’t it?”

Sophronia gave a watery nod.

Professor Braithwope passed her a large purple handkerchief, his mustache dropping sympathetically. Sophronia took it gratefully and dabbed at her eyes, concentrating on controlling her breathing.

Dimity, with perfect understanding, returned to the game so that Sophronia might gather herself together without further embarrassment.

The game ended when Dimity realized that she had already been beaten four moves earlier. The vampire picked up more knitting. This time it was some fine lace-weight work—an elegant lady's shawl.

"That's quite lovely, Professor." Sophronia was pleased to find that her voice did not wobble. "Does it say anything?" Knitted code was common parlance among Mademoiselle Geraldine's girls.

The vampire was confused at the question. "Say? No. I don't think so. The pattern is called dawn-light." He turned the pretty thing about in his hands. "Ironic, really." He focused on his task.

Dimity focused on Sophronia. "I think we could leave him for a bit, don't you?"

"Why, Dimity, are you suggesting we sneak down to the tea?"

"The perfect thing to cheer you up."

"How right you are. But we'd be in even more trouble if they discovered we abandoned our post. Then again, Soap came to tell me that we have Pickleman infiltrators among the guests. And I did say to the dewan I would try Felix."

"It would be a shame to waste our dresses on only the professor here."

The vampire looked up. "Whot, whot?"

"Nothing, Professor," singsonged the two girls in unison.

Sophronia cocked her head at Dimity. "Are you certain?"

Dimity's round face scrunched up as if she had eaten a sour lemon. "I hate missing everything. That's why I want to marry well and be a grand lady. Then I can host all the parties, all the time, and see everything that is going on *always*. How can you stand not knowing?"

"For you, it's gossip. For me, it's action."

Dimity blinked at this revelation. "I guess so."

"Shall we, then?"

Dimity grinned. "Professor, you don't mind if we step out for a few minutes, do you?"

“Certainly not. Bring some brandy, and some of those little cake thingies.”

“But, Professor, you don’t eat cake.”

“Don’t want to eat them. Want to toss them overboard at the wild ponies, whot.”

“Oh.”

“Man’s gotta have some kind of entertainment on this floating barge.”

“True, sir. Anything else?”

The vampire considered the question. “Well, if one of those young men is in the offing, I might like a snack in a half hour or so. Could hit the spot, if the stock is not too starched. Make sure to pick one of the sporty types. I loathe the taste of pasty dandies with delusions of intellectual grandeur and a propensity to lurk indoors. Spoils the flavor of the blood.”

Dimity and Sophronia exchanged looks.

“Does it really?” Sophronia made a mental note. Pillover was safe.

Then, before he could think of anything else, they left.

In a Pickle at a Tea Party

The tea party was in full vibration when they arrived. What probably started as mild talk and meek encounters around set tables had descended into a proper rout. The young persons were now circulating, seeking preferred partners or more engaging conversation. In some cases, this was out of custom; in others, it was the quest for adventure. A few young ladies had assignments. A small group danced at the back, accompanied by Miss Perriwonks on her lap harp with amplification dongle. There was even one table at cards.

Certainly, it was not done to have dancing and card play at a tea party, but the hour was late and it was New Year's Eve, so some laxness was permitted. Perhaps this had more to do with the fact that the professors had opted to break out the bubbly early. Professor Lefoux remained sober and glowering, but that was her lot in life. As yet she had not been driven to leave the head table and actually discipline anyone. Instead, she paid irritated attention to Mademoiselle Geraldine. Tea was the headmistress's favorite event, and though she objected to the presence of boys, she was disposed to enjoy herself.

The tea was very good—not to mention the champagne. Cook had truly excelled, for there were Scotch seedcake, grapes in brandy, glazed apples, orange biscuits with medlar jelly, almond torte—without cyanide, everyone hoped—and Charlotte pudding with Milanese cream. The boys gorged themselves, as was their wont, and even a few of the girls ate with more enthusiasm than delicacy.

Sophronia and Dimity glided through one of the staff entrances behind a clangermaid. Sophronia eyed a bowlful of glazed apples and plotted how to kidnap it for the sooties. The girls kept their fans up, covering most of their faces. They did not skulk, but instead acted as if they belonged, moving in behind the dancers as though observing the couples while engaged in a protracted private gossip.

"Do you see that?" Sophronia nudged Dimity to look at a table near the back corner, where Pillover and Agatha conversed. Pillover was almost animated as he relayed something to their friend.

"Do you think that is a declaration?" wondered Sophronia.

Dimity was disgusted. "My revolting brother has never *declared* anything, except perhaps an inexcusable love of Plutarch. This smooching of sooties has gone to your head."

"Smooching *werewolves*, please, Dimity." Sophronia took mock offense.

Dimity continued her affronted stance. "Pill is less firm in his commitments than calf's head jelly."

However, Pillover's face held a softness that Sophronia had never seen there before.

Agatha glanced up.

Sophronia flipped down her bladed fan for a brief moment, so Agatha could recognize her.

Agatha's eyes widened and she immediately raised her handkerchief to her face, drawing it across her lips. It was code, but not one Sophronia knew.

"What's she trying to say?" she asked Dimity.

Couples swirled between them. The debut blonde with the purple eyes was dancing with Lord Dingleproops. Dimity was entirely unruffled by this. So much for poetry.

"*I desire your acquaintance*," interpreted Dimity. "It's not espionage, it's everyday ordinary flirtation."

Fancy that. Accessory manipulation for normal young ladies. "Why didn't Lady Linette teach us that?"

Dimity gave her a funny look. "You're supposed to arrive here knowing it, of course. Doesn't everyone? I was practically weaned on handkerchief manipulation. Not to mention the language of flowers. How on earth do you know if a man is interested without it?"

“Conversation?”

Dimity shook her head at Agatha to indicate they didn’t understand what she wanted. “Why does she desire our acquaintance? She knows us already.”

The two girls linked arms and huddled in, so that anyone observing would think they were undertaking serious rumor-mongering.

“She probably has important information to impart. Wants us to go over,” suggested Sophronia.

“We can’t,” Dimity squeaked. “Sister Mattie is circulating.”

Agatha began winding her handkerchief around her third finger.

“What does *that* mean?” Sophronia asked Dimity.

“*I am married*.”

That was even more confusing. Sophronia lowered her fan again and shook her head at Agatha in an accusing way.

Agatha gave an obvious sigh and then said something firm to Pillover.

Pillover grabbed up Agatha’s handkerchief and began gesticulating at them with it.

“*I am a… new bride*?” Dimity tried.

Imagining Pillover dressed in white lace gave Sophronia a momentary attack of giggles.

Disgusted, Agatha and Pillover rose and moved through the tables. The settings were well conceived—tiered serving ware and low flower arrangements to encourage conversation. At the edge of the dance floor, Pillover took Agatha in his arms and began twirling her around, along with the other brave couples. Eventually, the set brought them close to Dimity and Sophronia. They swirled to a stop.

“Barred from attending, were you, Dim? How upsetting that must be. And how degrading to sneak into your own New Year’s party.” Pillover attacked his sister at her weakest point the moment they landed.

“Shut your cake hole, you revolting young blot,” responded Dimity affably.

Pillover did not look at all put out, but he did clamp his mouth shut.

“Now is not the time to rankle, you two.” Agatha sounded quite grown-up. “Mr. Plumleigh-Teignmott was recently telling me something terribly important. There are strangers among the boys attending our festivities.”

They all turned to peruse the room, trying to spot enemies among them.

“Picklemen or their intelligencers.” Sophronia saw no one notably out of place.

Pillover scrunched up his face, upset that they already knew.

Agatha rolled her eyes. “How did you know? Goodness’ sake, you’ve been nannying a vampire. It’s really too bad. I thought I had the leg up for once.”

“*I* have been nannying a vampire.” Dimity wanted this to be quite clear. “*Sophronia* has been sneaking off kissing sooties.”

“Oh!” Pillover was almost cheerful. “Is Soap here? Bang-up chappy, that Soap.”

“No, he jolly well isn’t here. I sent him packing.” Sophronia frowned.

“Not for good, I hope? I rather like the blighter.” Pillover was remarkably egalitarian for a toff. This was possibly because he preferred Greek translations to evil inventions and had suffered under Piston recriminations as a result. Pillover, being disenfranchised, felt that the friendship of a dark-skinned member of the proletariat was solidarity, not stigma.

“Which ones are the infiltrators?” asked Sophronia before they could get distracted by her romantic entanglements.

Pillover turned to point to the far corner of the room, near the head table. “Over there, with Lord Mersey, of course. Oh, hold the horses. They’ve gone!”

“Of course they’ve gone.” Sophronia whirled to find out where.

“Now, wait a moment, young lady.” Dimity sounded like Mademoiselle Geraldine in her frustration. “We only *just* got here.”

“You stay,” said Sophronia magnanimously. “I’m going after.”

“But you don’t even know where they went!” objected Agatha.

“And you can’t possibly leave without saying good evening to me.” A new voice, warm as honey, joined the conversation.

“Gammon!” said Pillover, and then, “Come along, Miss Woosmoss. This is too rich for my blood.”

Dimity also suddenly seemed to feel she was wanted elsewhere. Face still protected by her lace fan, she wandered into the crowd in a manner guaranteed to make her entirely unremarkable. She really *had* been paying attention in lessons of late.

“Ah, good evening, Lord Mersey.” Sophronia’s voice was equally

honeyed.

“Miss Temminnick. I understood you would not be joining us this evening.”

“Did you? How droll.”

“Of course, silly me. You go wherever you want, don’t you, Ria?” He seemed to be enjoying the fact that, this time, Sophronia was acting like Sophronia. Even if that meant she was sharp with him, or possibly because she was sharp with him.

“Not *everywhere*.”

“They trained you too well, didn’t they?”

Sophronia cocked her head. He was acting particularly combative. She shivered her fan slightly to expose something more of her neckline.

Felix paused, arrested, but it didn’t seem to lighten his mood. If anything, it made him glower. “Seen any nice werewolves lately?”

“There was a lovely dinner party while I was in London last week. You should have been there.”

“I probably should. But I was thinking, perhaps somewhat *more* recently.”

Sudden dread hit the pit of Sophronia’s stomach. *He knows Soap is here. Does that mean the Picklemen know? Is Soap in danger?* “What information do you think you have, Felix?” She lowered her voice.

Blow the dewan’s seduction plan, she thought. *I’m going to strangle the little traitor right here. Where’s my garrote?* Her free hand fisted around her *carnet de bal*. The long chains were strong enough to wrap around someone’s neck—she’d made certain of it.

Felix looked down at his fingernails and pursed his beautiful mouth. “Nothing of any consequence. But then, neither is he.”

Strangling is too good for him. Sophronia snapped the guard off her bladed fan with her thumb and stepped in a little closer. The razor edge gleamed.

“Now, now, Miss Temminnick, you wouldn’t want to ruin that stunning—really, quite stunning, and so mature—dress with blood, would you?”

Sophronia gave a cold smile. “This dress is red, my dear viscount, with a pattern designed to hide stains.”

Felix looked slightly uncomfortable. “Of course it is. And yet you can’t help *him* by threatening me.”

“Killing him once wasn’t enough for you?”

Felix grimaced. “What, bitter you can’t spawn tea-colored infants named Bubble and Suds?”

“Is that an attempt at humor? I wouldn’t bother if I were you.”

Felix spoke through gritted teeth. “You were mine and he stole you.”

“Poor boy, is that what you thought?” Sophronia considered the root of his anger. *Was I some weird prize to him or did I actually break his heart? Terribly careless of me if I did. And either way, Soap suffers because of his bitterness?* “You never had me, silly. Even if you had, you would have driven me away, in the end. I don’t like traitors.”

Felix’s beautiful blue eyes turned pleading. “I tried to warn you from the dirigible, remember? I tried to stop my father from shooting.”

“And yet you told him we were Geraldine’s girls, putting us all in danger in the first place.”

“You’ve been safe all this time, no attempts on your life. Not from my people, anyway.”

“Because we’ve been at school and you couldn’t get to us!”

“And what about when you were in London recently?”

“You think I didn’t know the werewolves had guards around my sister’s house every night? Felix.” Sophronia was frustrated. “Why are we always at dagger points?” Once, he had been a gentleman. She still remembered the prong incident fondly.

“Because you chose *wrong*.”

Sophronia wasn’t certain if he was talking about the Picklemen or Soap. “No, you did.”

Something gleamed in his pale eyes. “You sure about that? You don’t know everything, Ria. You only think you do.” There was something in his tone. Had his loyalties shifted?

“Actually, I know I don’t. So you tell me. The Picklemen on board, what do they want?”

“Not you.”

“Someone else, then? Someone who knows something. Lady Linette, perhaps?” She looked up at the head table over the sharp edge of her fan. Lady Linette sat chatting animatedly next to Mademoiselle Geraldine. There was no one lurking in the shadows to kidnap her. As if that were possible with Lady Linette.

“Something? Some device of Professor Lefoux’s?” She pushed, teasing Felix with her ignorance. Pushing him to prove he knew more than she did, lord it over her.

“Poor Sophronia, you have no idea what is really going on, do you? No idea at all.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, then?”

“Me? I’m only here for the tea.” With which he turned and glided off—his well-tailored coat swishing. *Bother Felix for looking almost as pretty walking away as he does facing forward.*

Sophronia actually cursed. Then she returned to the real world. Felix’s coyness was a hint that something more was afoot. Perhaps the Pickleman infiltrators included a key member of their infrastructure? The Chutney, even?

At which juncture, the school’s proximity alarm sounded.

The proximity alarm was a series of very loud bells throughout the airship. Officially, it meant balcony access was restricted and all students were to remain stationary and *not involve themselves* in whatever was wrong. Unofficially, it meant that the school was under attack and the soldier mechanicals were marshaling on the squeak decks with cannons at the ready.

In the dining hall, the flirting and dancing and swilling of hot beverages ceased. The young ladies turned to look expectantly at the high table, awaiting orders. The nascent evil geniuses were less composed. One dropped his tea cake in alarm, a few dashed about in search of their hats—corralling one’s hat is an instinctive response bred into all gentlemen. Eventually, they realized that they looked foolish, and settled into merely glancing nervously about. Verbal speculation, of course, was rife.

“Proximity alert, students. Remain calm and continue to enjoy your tea.” Mademoiselle Geraldine’s voice boomed out. “Geraldine’s girls are not overset by a little ringing. Gentlemen of *quali-tay* do not seek their hats at the drop of a hat.” She paused to grapple with her problematic metaphor, then soldiered on. “The teachers will investigate while I stay with you. Lady Linette, if you would be so kind?”

Lady Linette rose and nodded sharply to Professor Lefoux and Sister Mattie as well as a couple of the visiting Bunson's professors. They all marched from the room. Lady Linette paused at the doorway and issued a protocol order to the nearest serving mechanical. In response, the surrounding clangermaids and buttlingers rolled along their tracks to block the various doorways. There they clamped down hard to the rail, making it difficult for any student to leave the room.

Sophronia's mind was on the visiting infiltrators. Had the Picklemen activated the alarm for some reason? Or could they be sabotaging the airship's defenses, making it easier for attackers?

There was no way she was staying trapped with tea at a time like this. Even knowing that watchful gazes were on the students, she inched toward the nearest door. She fished about inside Bumbersnoot for her obstructor. Throughout all of this, her little mechanimal remained quiet. At least she knew the Picklemen hadn't activated their valves. She thought to use her obstructor on the mechanical blocking the door and then climb out over its head.

"You there!" snapped Mademoiselle Geraldine. "Young lady in red, at the back. No leaving!"

Sophronia twitched at being noticed. She whirled to find the headmistress's eyes fixed on her.

Others turned to stare. Someone laughed, not nicely. Probably Felix Mersey. Or Preshea.

Sophronia kept her fan up, guarding her face, and made a neat curtsy of acknowledgment. Mademoiselle Geraldine looked like she might call her forward to reprimand her, but she was saved by a loud bang and a sad crunching noise.

The whole dirigible shuddered.

People screamed. Those still at tea rose from their seats. A few went for the doors. The mechanicals would not let them by. Sophronia's transgression was forgotten in the hubbub.

"Back to your seats, everyone!" ordered one of the remaining Bunson's teachers, rising to stand next to Mademoiselle Geraldine. Across the wide room, Sophronia could see he was pale and holding on to the head table in fear.

Dimity, Pillover, and Agatha used the panic to congregate around

Sophronia.

Then the ship began to list to starboard.

Mademoiselle Geraldine looked less composed at this. “All will be well, young people of *quali-tay.* Stick to your tea.”

“One of the balloons must be down.” Agatha tried to console an unhappy-looking Pillover.

There was another boom and then a loud clanging sound. The ship shuddered again. The bells continued to peal.

Pillover said, “I hate adventure. Did I mention recently that I hate adventure? Well, I do. Sophronia, is this your fault? Have you arranged an unwarranted adventure for us?”

“I don’t *think* so.” Sophronia pretended to seriously consider the question. “Not this time.”

“We are definitely under fire.” Dimity ignored her brother.

Greatly daring, Agatha patted Pillover sympathetically on the arm.

The ship shook again.

Pillover turned green.

“Flywaymen or Picklemen?” wondered Agatha.

“Or both.” Sophronia searched the room for Felix’s dark head. She couldn’t find him. He couldn’t have gotten out—he hadn’t near enough sneaking ability for that. He must be under a table or something.

Come to think on it, Sophronia couldn’t see *any* of his ilk. “Where, oh where, have all the pretty Pistons gone?”

“Sophronia! You can’t be thinking about flirting now,” Dimity reprimanded.

“No.” Sophronia lurched slightly as the airship vibrated like a dog shaking off water. “I’m thinking about taking cover.”

The floor of the dining hall was now tilted to such an extreme, it was becoming impossible to hold one’s footing in a dignified manner. The tables were all slipping toward the starboard wall, as only the head table was bolted down.

The students, some of them still seated and attempting to take tea, play cards, and engage in polite conversation, gripped the edges of their tables as they slid. The whole thing felt as if it were happening underwater. Apparently even a major battle was slow moving when floating.

“Hold fast, young persons of *quali-tay.* Hold fast!” sang out

Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“We’re sinking.” Dimity’s round face was pale and she clutched her tassel jet necklace as if it were a talisman she could wish upon.

“Come on.” Sophronia led them to the starboard side of the room, which was now a steep downhill jaunt. The four of them backed up against the wall in the corner furthest from the head table. “Brace yourselves. We’re going down.”

“How do you know?” Pillover quivered in apprehension.

Sophronia tilted her head to where the Pistons had flipped a table on its edge, legs toward the starboard wall, and arranged themselves behind it, barricaded. If the ship continued to tilt, they would be effectively protected from tea party fallout. Except, perhaps, liquid damage.

Part of her wanted to stay with the Pistons, since they obviously knew what was going on. But the rest of her knew that the safest place from falling objects was actually the hallway, if they could only get past the mechanicals. Then again, with gas lines running throughout, if they did crash, the hallways might explode.

The floor was almost at a forty-five-degree angle. Everything that could slide, did. Things upended, and crashed and tumbled about. Several of the young ladies and—it must be admitted—the young gentlemen screamed. The young ladies were more properly padded for sliding, but it made for an undignified sight—ruffled skirts and petticoats, legs kicking about. In a few cases undergarments were visible!

Pillover fainted.

They all ended up bumped and bruised, piled together and leaning up against one another in an extremely intimate crush. As the proximity alarm bells continued to clang, any attempt at politely awkward conversation was impossible.

Mademoiselle Geraldine was looking quite worried.

Sophronia suspected that they were the only ones who realized they were sinking. One of the things about dirigibles, as with all balloon travel, was that without seeing the ground, it was difficult to know when one was falling out of the sky.

That is, of course, until one crashed.

Mademoiselle Geraldine’s Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality crashed into the moor with an impossibly loud thud. It shuddered in a way that put all previous shakes to shame. Then it rocked back and forth a few times, before ending up beached like a whale on its starboard side.

It was, after all, not designed to land.

No one screamed this time, but there were a number of gasps. A few of the young ladies who were nested near gentlemen of interest fainted delicately in said gentlemen’s direction.

It was a very stately crash. Mademoiselle Geraldine had reason to be proud. True, tea was spilled, and cakes dropped, but general behavior could not be faulted. Even the debuts confined themselves to squeaks of alarm.

“Is anyone injured?” Mademoiselle Geraldine’s voice rang out.

One of the young men had sprained his wrist and a debut had managed to scratch her cheek on a flower arrangement, but otherwise nothing serious. Everyone breathed sighs of relief and began to extract themselves from the pile.

Dimity slapped her brother awake.

They were still trapped in the dining hall. The mechanicals were unaffected by the tilting, since they were hooked into tracks. They could stay blocking the doors no matter what the angle of repose. However, Lady Linette’s voice could be heard ordering them into movement.

Sophronia and her friends remained flattened against the wall, out of the way. Pillover, still pale and shaking, stuck close to Agatha, solicitous of her well-being, or more likely, she was solicitous of his.

Apart from Pillover, her little band was unperturbed by the fact that they had crashed. Except, of course, that they had no idea what exactly had caused the unexpected plummet. Falling out of the sky was one thing, but doing so for unknown reasons was quite unacceptable.

Having set the mechanicals back in motion, Lady Linette skidded into the room, teetering on her heeled shoes to lean against the tilt.

“Oh, good, you’re all still here. Mademoiselle Geraldine, is everyone well?”

Mademoiselle Geraldine had collapsed back into her seat at the high table. “It appears so. But, my dear, whatever has happened?”

“Flywaymen,” reported Lady Linette. “We’re grounded, I’m afraid. And we suspect a gas leak on the record-room level, so we must evacuate.

Luckily, we drifted back toward Swiffle. We are only a few miles from Bunson's."

The teachers moved to inspect the refugees. Sophronia had no doubt there was more to the story, but this was what had been decided was worthy of headmistress and student ears.

Lady Linette began barking orders. "Ladies and visiting gentlemen, please congregate separately by year. Form orderly groups and follow me. We're going to climb out one of the nearest side balconies and drop to the ground from there. Ladies, grab your wraps and switch to practical shoes, if you have them. Dancing slippers over heels, walking boots over both. I will not have you catching cold or twisting ankles needlessly. Gentlemen, do not forget your hats. This is no lark—everyone is to stay respectable. We are safely landed, such as it is, so there is no cause to lose our sense of propriety."

Students scrambled about, searching for clothing and dropped objects. It took a few moments to get sorted, but they managed. Many of the more resourceful young ladies pocketed crumpets and other portable nibbles. Some even wrapped up whole cakes in their shawls. Everyone had heard stories about how bad the food was at the boys' school.

There was disappointment at the precipitous end to the celebration, not to mention the prospect of tromping across a damp moor in dinner slippers, but it was somewhat mitigated by excitement. There was an undercurrent of eagerness among some of the older girls. Preshea positively glowed. A late-night stroll across the moor might be utterly unpleasant, but it was an opportunity for liaison unprecedented by a mere tea party. After all, they were Geraldine's girls, always eager for a bit of peril. And this, it could not be denied, was shaping up to be a *most* perilous evening.

Sophronia's mind was calculating. She couldn't accept that flywaymen would attack for no other reason than to crash the airship. She would wager Dimity's jet necklace that they were being grounded for a specific purpose, and that the flywaymen—if indeed it was them—were under orders from the Picklemen. Sophronia had not forgotten that there were already Picklemen on board.

She had, however, forgotten Professor Braithwope.

Evacuation Situation

Professor Braithwope came running in, mustache aquiver. He was still wearing full evening garb, but over it he had donned a yellow brocade banyan and sleeping cap. In one hand he clutched his knitting, and in the other a very special crossbow. He was quite absentminded about holding it, as though the crossbow were a stray profiterole that had caught on his sleeve. Sophronia had seen that miniature crossbow only once before, when she first arrived at the school. It shot a kind of targeting bolt, upon which the soldier mechanicals aimed their cannons. She had thought such an important weapon would be removed from the vampire's possession the moment his tether snapped. But for some reason he still had it, which meant the school had been unprotected during the previous battle.

He's been running around with that and the teachers didn't know where to find him because Dimity and I abandoned our post. Sophronia winced, guilt ridden. Was she responsible for the airship crashing, because she hadn't stayed to nanny a vampire?

Quick as the vampire had dashed in, he dashed out again.

Sophronia grabbed Dimity by the hand and nipped behind a tipped-over tea table. While the others obediently grouped by age, they made for the nearest door. Sophronia turned in the doorway and, pretending to breathe hard, dashed toward Professor Lefoux, dragging Dimity behind.

"Have you seen Professor Braithwope?" she gasped.

Professor Lefoux glared at them. "He was just here, but now he's gone again. Wasn't he your responsibility?"

Dimity fell in with the story easily. “There was all sorts of chaos, and then he grabbed up this tiny crossbow and ran off.”

“We couldn’t possibly hold him. He’s too fast and strong.” Sophronia padded the lie further.

“I hardly think that would stop you, Miss Temminnick.” Professor Lefoux was not playing along.

“You didn’t give us permission to use force. Certainly not on a teacher.” Sophronia made her face as blank as possible.

Professor Lefoux shot them a suspicious look. “Why are you dressed like that?”

Dimity was ready. “My idea. Even if we were only going to see the professor, we wanted to look our best. It’s New Year’s Eve, after all.”

Lady Linette came up, tutting. “We should never have put students in charge of a teacher. If we had known this would happen… Ah, well, can’t worry over spilled tea. Where is the good vampire?”

“That’s what I asked.” Sophronia’s tone implied that this was a most sensible question.

Professor Lefoux snorted. “He was here and then nipped off, with our sighting bolts, mind you. Could have used those half an hour ago. I had best go after him.”

Lady Linette countermanded her. “No, he’ll be fine. The ship is grounded and he can’t very well stray. We are taking all possible victims with us. I need you to help with the students. Your drone duties will have to wait.”

Professor Lefoux looked more annoyed at being told what to do than being denied the opportunity to check up on her master. Sophronia supposed being drone to an insane vampire was a bit different from being drone to a regular-type vampire.

“What about us?” she asked.

“You are absolved of your responsibility with regard to Professor Braithwope. Line up with the others to disembark. We’re away until I’m certain all the leaks have been dealt with. Is that understood?”

Sophronia and Dimity curtsied.

A thought occurred to Sophronia. “Wait—Lady Linette?”

“What is it, Miss Temminnick? I have an evacuation to conduct.”

“What about the sooties?”

Lady Linette arched one brow. “Concern for the lower orders? How terribly civic-minded of you, Miss Temminnick.”

“Well?”

“Who do you think is responsible for fixing those gas leaks?”

Sophronia clamped down an immediate protest. Of course, sooties always got the dangerous tasks. The last time a cannon tore through one of the balloons, it had been sooties who climbed to repaired the damage. Gas leaks, by comparison, were easier dealt with—so long as they took care not to spark.

“And what about the danger to the sooties from Professor Braithwope?”

“You should have thought of that before you let him free, now, shouldn’t you? I’ve no time to worry about the grubby necks of the working class. Do as you are instructed.”

Despite Lady Linette’s dismissive sneer, not to mention her own upbringing, Sophronia considered many of those grubby boys her friends. Soap adored them all. If they got hurt, he would never forgive her. That reminded her of Soap.

Suddenly, she wasn’t so upset about being evacuated to Bunson’s. She could warn Vieve that the Picklemen knew about Soap, perhaps even stop whatever evil they had planned for him. Although half of her still wanted to stay and protect the sooties.

“There isn’t enough of me to go around,” she muttered, climbing after the other students.

So it was that the tea party attendees—still in fancy dress—as well as the human staff and a handful of the off-shift greasers and engineers found themselves walking across a moor. The night was clear and the moon so near to full that, despite the cold, it looked to be a pleasant hike. One could easily pretend the lump of a tor off to the left was picturesque. Privately, Sophronia always thought tors looked like cow pats. Young men offered young ladies their arms. Bunson’s teachers offered Geraldine’s theirs. All was amicable.

Mademoiselle Geraldine stayed on board. She was still a little tipsy. Sophronia hung back in hopes of catching a roving sootie. If she could get a message to Handle about the fact that there were loose Pickleman intelligencers—not to mention a loose vampire—on board she’d feel much better about the whole situation.

She overheard the headmistress's brief exchange with Sister Mattie.

"No, dear, no. You know I never leave the ship. I shall be perfectly topping here. I will avoid open flame, and roving fang, and finish the bubbly. Don't concern yourself on my account. I'll see you in the morning. Enjoy your midnight jaunt." She belched quietly.

"Oh, really," said Sister Mattie. "Just be careful?"

"Oh, my dear, what could possibly go wrong?"

Sophronia was never more sensitive to the headmistress's ignorance than at that juncture. It felt horrible, leaving the school without any protection. All the fallen dirigible had now was a headmistress who knew nothing, a crazy vampire who knew a whole lot but couldn't remember any of it, and a handful of sooties.

"Lady Linette." Sophronia wove her way through the long line of strolling couples to her teacher. Preshea had found herself a tall moon-faced lad who looking nothing short of stunned at his good fortune. Poor chap. She exchanged a brief glance with the deadly brunette, and then left her to her work.

"Permission to speak freely?" Sophronia had once heard a soldier use that phrase.

"At a school for spies, Miss Temminnick? Surely you jest." Lady Linette stared at her, unblinking. They were of a height, for Lady Linette still wore her heeled slippers.

Sophronia was impressed—only Lady Linette would hike across the moor in Paris kid shoes with a military lift. She looked meaningfully at Lady Linette's escort, the oldest and most severe of the Bunson's teachers.

Lady Linette sighed. "Excuse me a moment, Professor Faldetta? I'm certain you understand. She's one of *those* students. You must have *those*?"

"Say no more, dear lady. Say no more."

Sophronia and Lady Linette moved away, out of everyone's hearing.

"Quickly, child."

"I wish to stay with the ship." Sophronia almost shocked herself with the statement. *My goodness,* she thought, *I am growing up. Either that or I'm learning the value of putting in the appearance of playing by the rules.*

"What did you just say?"

"I've no intention of actually going aboard, and I shall certainly stay away from any possible explosion. It's only that I don't feel right about

leaving the professor unguarded."

"He has Mademoiselle Geraldine."

"She's partaken rather freely of the champagne." *Quite apart from her being a figurehead and incompetent.*

"Miss Temminnick! Imagine speaking of your betters in such a manner."

Sophronia gritted her teeth. Even when she wanted to be straight with Lady Linette, it was near on impossible to tell her the truth. At this point, both of them automatically twisted their words.

A new suspicion occurred—perhaps Lady Linette was behind it all? Perhaps this was her scheme—not to crash the airship—but to get them all inside Bunson's overnight, a mass infiltration. Sophronia switched tactics. "Whatever it is you want to find out at Bunson's, you can't possibly need me as well as everyone else."

Lady Linette cocked her head. "Is that what you think is going on?"

"I think it's a possibility. And if not, you are the type to seize on this as a serendipitous opportunity."

"But?"

"But I think the crash was arranged, and we both know who likely arranged it. I think the sooties are in danger and someone has to stay with them. And I think there are Picklemen already on board. You didn't believe me before, and this is the result. You owe me."

"Do I really?" Lady Linette was a master at controlling voice and expression.

"Please, Lady Linette, I'm begging you."

"Are you indeed? A novel experience for us both. But it's hardly sporting of me to make an exception only for you, Miss Temminnick."

"Look at them. I'm the only one who even *wants* to stay." Sophronia gestured in frustration.

It could not be denied. The students ambling across the moor were clearly enjoying themselves.

"Point taken, Miss Temminnick. Very well, but do it quietly, and leave your *particular* friends out of it. All of them stay with me. If you get yourself killed, I'll deny everything and report it as a horseback riding accident to your family."

Sophronia arched an eyebrow, wondering how Lady Linette would finagle that, but not doubting her for a second. "Agreed."

Of course, Sophronia could have faded off into the shadows of the moor right then, but she had to talk to Dimity and Agatha first.

"So?" asked Dimity the moment she rejoined them.

"I'm going back."

"Very well." Dimity did not even flinch. "What are we waiting for?"

"No," Sophronia hated to say it. "This time, only me."

"That's not on. We're a team," protested Dimity, "like tea and milk, or cake and custard, or pork and apple."

"Yes, we get the point," interjected her brother.

"I agree. You can't do it alone." Agatha showed unexpected pluck.

This caused Pillover to emit an agonized grumble. He'd come along if Agatha insisted, but he knew Sophronia of old, and following her always got messy. Once, he'd ended up in a petticoat.

Sophronia explained. "It's not that I don't want you. It's that I was recently thinking: if only there were more of me. One to stay and another to go to Bunson's. Then I realized that there kind of is *more*. I have you lot. The Pistons know about Soap. They know he's hiding at Bunson's. He's vulnerable tonight, so close to full moon. He only has Vieve to protect him. You know she's not a fighter. You have to go take care of him for me. Please. I'll find out what's happening with the airship. And I'll have Bumbersnoot with me."

"Oh, yes, Bumbersnoot, heaps of good he'll do." Dimity didn't like it at all. "One of us could still go with you."

"I'm sorry. I'd want to come in your shoes, but there's something bigger going on. Someone has to get word to the dewan as well. One of you should ride to London while the other stays with Soap. I won't ask Pillover. He hasn't the training, apart from his general… reticence." Pillover looked like he felt he ought to protest, as a gentleman, but preferred to be relieved.

"Sophronia sending to London for help? I never thought I'd see the day," mocked Dimity.

"I don't like it, but the dewan has to come for Soap. And he has to know that the flywaymen brought down the school. Although how to get him the message—"

Agatha interrupted, her voice cool with confidence. "I can get to him."

Sophronia turned to her in surprise. "You can?"

Agatha looked at all three of them. Her face was suffused with mixed

guilt and pride. “You never guessed did you? Not even you, Sophronia?”

Sophronia’s stomach sank. “Guessed what, exactly, Agatha?”

Dimity put her hand over her mouth, preparing to be shocked. Something awful was about to happen.

Agatha drew herself upright and took a deep breath.

Pillover ogled. Poor boy couldn’t help himself. Dimity was too carried away by the drama to box his ears.

Agatha said, “I’ve been working for someone, all along.”

“You mean the entire time you’ve been at the school you’ve already had a patron?” Sophronia struggled to understand the specifics.

Agatha nodded. “My papa’s not all *that* rich.”

Dimity squeaked. “Oh, Agatha!”

Sophronia’s brow wrinkled. She felt hurt and betrayed, but she was also impressed. “All along? Gosh. Were you assigned to infiltrate the school from the start, or were you sent here for training?”

Agatha tilted her head. “Bit of both.” The redhead glanced at Pillover then, as if she’d been afraid to do so before. She was still the same person—there was her awkwardness leaking through. Still, Sophronia couldn’t help but admit that Agatha was an excellent choice to infiltrate a school for spies.

“You don’t seem surprised,” Agatha said to Pillover, voice soft.

Pillover shrugged, dour as ever. “I always figured you were special. Lack of chatter.”

Dimity was on the edge of tears. “Oh, Agatha, how could you? You aren’t…” She trailed off, took a small breath, and then whispered, “You aren’t working for *them*, are you?”

“Them who?”

“The flywaymen?”

“No.”

“The Picklemen?”

“Certainly not!”

“The Westminster Hive? Alongside Monique?”

“Not quite.”

Sophronia’s mind whirled. She was calculating all the times Agatha had been in the right place at the right time, or absent when she might have been caught. She thought over all the strange glances she had interpreted as

social awkwardness. All those gifts from Agatha's wealthy, but absent, father. All those dresses, so fine and fashionable, so exactly wrong for Agatha's coloring and figure. Almost too *exactly* wrong.

"Lord Akeldama," Sophronia stated rather than asked.

Agatha, looking miserable, nodded.

"Nicely done." Sophronia was impressed. "Are you set up to become his drone once you finish?"

Agatha shrugged. "He doesn't take females, as a rule. Although he once offered for you in a carriage about town." By which statement she proved she was telling the truth. Sophronia had told the others Lord Akeldama was courting her for indenture, but she had never detailed that private drive when the vampire first suggested he make her his drone.

Agatha continued her explanation. "But you're pretty. Plus, you'd stay in the field for work and in the background the rest of the time."

Sophronia opened her mouth to protest, as modesty demanded, but Agatha forged on, now looking more fierce than miserable. "I'm better at being invisible and dowdy. Being the wallflower. No, don't try to make me feel better. I know what I'm good at. But I also know I'm an object of pity. That's useful, too, but doesn't make a girl feel all that nice most of the time. He saw through it, you know? From the very first time we met. I was only ten. But he won't take me for a drone and he won't put me in the field where my talents aren't up to Sophronia's standards."

"So what are you getting out of this arrangement?"

"Enough money to set up my own household, if I want." Agatha was purposefully *not* looking at Pillover.

"No!" Dimity gasped. An unmarried woman setting up house was the mark of a mistress.

Agatha looked at Sophronia, but she was talking to Pillover. "I would be an independent woman of means. I could love as I willed without consulting my family. He even promised me an allowance, if I continued to pass on information."

Pillover looked at his feet.

As riveting as this all was, Sophronia finally recovered from her shock enough to bring them back to the point. They hadn't time to process Agatha's revelation further now. The string of students was ambling away, and Sophronia had a ship to save.

“So you can get a message to Lord Akeldama, and he’ll alert the dewan.”

Agatha nodded.

“You’d do that for me?”

Agatha nodded again.

“And Dimity, you’ll check on Soap?”

Dimity nodded, although she was still staring at Agatha, eyes wide.

Pillover seemed genuinely afraid. “You aren’t going to give me an assignment, are you, Sophronia?”

“I wouldn’t insult your personality.”

“Aw, Sophronia, you care.” Pillover looked almost happy.

Sophronia nodded. “I’ll follow when I can. If you haven’t heard from me by morning, send help or come back yourselves?”

They didn’t discuss what or how, but the two girls nodded.

“Good luck,” said Sophronia.

Dimity rushed over and hugged her hard. It was most unladylike. Bumbersnoot was crushed between them, the side of his carapace digging into Sophronia’s hip bone.

It was wonderful.

“I trust you, Dimity.” For Sophronia, this was as near as she got to an admission of affection.

Dimity sniffled. “Don’t do anything too drastic, please?”

Then Dimity let her go and trotted after the other students, back set against Agatha.

Sophronia looked at Agatha. She felt a change in the order of things, a new respect between them. “She’ll come around.”

“But you aren’t angry with me?”

Pillover, perturbed by the prospect of sentimentality, made a hasty bow and drifted after his sister.

Sophronia examined her feelings. She hated talking about them, but she intended to hit Agatha with the honesty that Agatha hadn’t afford her. “I feel betrayed, but I would have done the same thing, in your position.”

Agatha paled but took it like the intelligencer she was. “That’s fair.”

“You really will send to London for help? I can trust you in this at least?”

Agatha was in grave earnest. “Absolutely.” Perhaps she would be a good

match for Pillover. If they married, they'd have a wedding as near to a wake as might be. For some reason this thought cheered Sophronia.

"Take care of them?" Sophronia's hand gesture took in not only Dimity and Pillover but also Vieve and Soap in town.

Agatha smiled and turned to catch up to the others.

Pillover paused to offer her his arm.

They followed Dimity into the night.

Sophronia returned to the school in a roundabout way. If she were the infiltrating Picklemen, she'd have guards posted at the wreck. Taking into consideration that fact, plus their previous interest in the pilot's bubble, she angled to come around the stern of the airship.

The moon was bright enough for her to assess the damage as she crept through the underbrush. It wasn't pretty, but it also didn't look fatal. Some splintered wood, a balloon or two damaged, rigging dangling free.

She kept getting distracted by the fact that her chest area was freezing. Her stupid dress was too full and too low for clandestine activities not involving seduction. She fervently wished for a nice set of breeches and a man's shirt. In the end she settled for shedding her top petticoat and constantly tugging up on the neckline. The liberated petticoat she tucked under a gorse bush, where it sat like some sad forgotten fluffy creature. In one respect, she was grateful for the dress—dark red with black brocade was perfect for fading into the heath.

She shifted Bumbersnoot to lie across her back. The little mechanimal stayed silent but for the faint tick-tock of his tail. As she inched closer, she checked to make certain her *carnet de bal* and bladed fan still hung securely from her waist. She was as equipped as a ball gown allowed. She stripped out all the pretty frills and fripperies from her hair and used a ribbon to tie it tightly back and out of her eyes.

No Picklemen were in sight, but there were sooties everywhere, busy making repairs. Two greasers yelled instructions, one from the midship squeak deck and another from the balcony above boiler room level.

Two of the balloons had lost a great deal of helium. Despite the resulting limpness, they were solid enough to withstand the weight of sooties

crawling over them, applying slap patches. That was causing the airship to straighten, like a student caught slouching and chided into proper posture. Still, the school wasn't floating anywhere without a refill, and that was going to be a challenge so far from the train tracks.

If anything, the whole operation was going suspiciously well. *The attackers never intended to cause permanent damage, but instead to force a grounding. Did they want an evacuation also?*

Sophronia almost slapped her forehead with her hand, she felt so stupid. *They are after the airship itself! They want the school, and they've wanted the school all along. That's what the pilot's bubble infiltration was all about. They were surveying the darned thing, learning how it worked, determining whether it would fill their needs. They weren't after war airships—they were after our school. It's the biggest dirigible in the country.*

Sophronia scanned the surrounding landscape. She gasped—quietly, of course. For riding low and coming in fast toward them were three flywayman airships… big ones.

Abandoned Ship

One of the sooties noticed the incoming ships and shouted, pointing. There was nothing they could do. They were sitting ducks. Or more precisely, one great big huge sitting duck.

At that moment, three large men appeared, one on each squeak deck. They held fierce-looking guns, which they swung around, pointing from one sootie to the next.

The sooties reacted instantly. They were not fighters and had no cards in this game. They were merely laborers, and the lowest of those. Grunts in the boiler room. They, quite rightly, thought only in terms of saving their own skins. Most of them froze where they climbed, then turned to face this new threat.

One sootie panicked and jumped off the lower deck. He ran off across the moor, fortunately away from Sophronia's hiding spot.

The forward deck Pickleman took aim and fired.

The sootie cried out and fell dead.

The man who had shot him raised a speaking tube to his mouth and shouted through it, loud enough for Sophronia to hear. Even though the leaking helium caused his voice to squeak, there was no mistaking the menace in his words. He sounded like a very angry mouse.

"And the same to any others who run. Now, you six, finish the repairs. The rest of you, prepare the fizz tube. We're bringing in helium. Greasers, you're with the boiler contingent. Don't even think about plotting to countermand my orders. You work for us now, or you die, simple as that.

Prepare the boilers to burn up. I'm with you to keep you on track. Do as ordered and you may even be rewarded for your troubles. Now *move!*"

The sooties—street-smart and blood-wary—did as instructed.

The man with the speaking tube vanished below. The two others stood firm, weapons at the ready to ensure no others broke for freedom. No other sootie tried.

The six chosen sooties dutifully finished up repairs and assembled amidships, shoulders hunched and movements cautious.

Sophronia wanted to go to the fallen boy on the moor, but she did not doubt the Pickleman's aim. The boy's path had no cover under the moonlight. That poor lad was likely beyond what little aid she could offer. The living needed her now.

She continued toward the ship. The men with the guns were focused inward, concerned with holding prisoners, not checking for possible infiltration.

Sophronia ended up directly below the aft section with the propeller and its lone smokestack above her. It was odd to see the airship so near the ground. The bottom part of the propeller almost touched the heather. Above her was the hold storage area, with the glass platform she'd ridden up the first time she came to Mademoiselle Geraldine's. That platform was locked into place, and there was no other point of entry.

She turned her attention to the middle section, the lowest level of which was where mechanicals were stored and serviced. The kitchens were above that. This section had a loading bay with massive doors that opened like a cellar's. Manned by mechanicals, these were too heavy for one person to push open. However, along the side between this and the hold, servicing the kitchen and dining hall above, ran a tube of dumbwaiters. There were rungs on the outside of the tubes, because the waiters often required maintenance. Sophronia shot out her hurlie at the lowest rung. She pulled back to get a grip and then climbed up. The incoming flywaymen were out of sight, and she was shielded from view by the bulk of the ship.

If the sooties had been ordered to prep the boilers, then her assessment of the situation was correct—the Picklemen wanted to kidnap the school. The incoming ships must be intending to provide cargo and crew. She would also lay very good odds that they intended to cannibalize the helium they needed from those balloons to reinflate the school's.

She didn’t need to watch it happen. Soon as she could, she pulled out a hairpin and picked the lock of a maintenance hatch at the top of the dumbwaiter tube. It was relatively easy to climb down the inside. It was the right size for a girl bracing herself back and forth, although her wide skirts —even tucked up—gave the tube a thorough cleaning. Her climb was more an undignified waddle, but no one was watching. She felt that the kitchen was the best access point, since it was likely abandoned. Picklemen would think it beneath them to congregate in such a menial area.

The kitchen was indeed empty.

Sophronia found a small knife and, cursing her lack of pockets, fed it to Bumbersnoot. She filched a few apples, some bread, and a wedge of hard cheese, which she wrapped in her handkerchief, attaching it to her chatelaine. Lady Linette was very firm on the matter of nicking food. “A lady must always be prepared. Snacks are an essential part of espionage.”

Sophronia used the stairs out of the kitchen, emerging into the middle-level hallway. This was the section with the assembly deck and drop-down staircase, as well as some of the bigger classrooms.

It was quiet enough to be unnerving. This area was normally crowded with students, teachers, human staff, and mechanicals. People rushed from tumbling class, or stage-to-street performance lessons, or flowerpot transplanting and tossing practice. Now there was nothing but empty stillness. Even the mechanicals were missing. Her obstructor was entirely unnecessary.

She heard the boilers start up—the airship was once again fully upright.

Sophronia sniffed the air and caught no lingering smell of gas. She kept out her obstructor just in case, and moved through the school on silent feet. There was a faint lifting sensation, and a quick glance out a porthole showed the moor retreating. It also showed three grounded flywayman ships with flaccid balloons. All of their helium had been transferred to Mademoiselle Geraldine’s.

Should I check on the sooties or go see what is happening in the pilot’s bubble? Do I try to find Mademoiselle Geraldine, or should I assume she’s been taken hostage? And what about Professor Braithwope? Sophronia was overwhelmed with options. Lady Linette’s voice rang through her head.

Never enter a situation, social or strategic, without understanding the personnel and protocols in place. In other words, it is always better to know

the state, color, and number of handkerchiefs in a room before you blow anyone's nose.

Sophronia took that to heart, partly because it gave her an objective. First she would search the airship, count the number of Picklemen and flywaymen on board, and note their positions. She'd already seen the three with guns, and two of those were still up on the squeak decks. If she were in charge, she'd keep them as lookouts. The third was down in the boiler room. There had to be someone in charge of the infiltration, and he'd want a command chair. Would he station himself near the pilot's bubble or on a squeak deck? No, safer somewhere inside the ship. He'd need at least three runners to carry orders to the others. Then there were probably two in the pilot's bubble. Plus an assorted number of heavy lifters—bully boys. They'd have to spread out, with one to keep an eye on the headmistress and another to track Professor Braithwope. That was a lot of men to account for. Sophronia estimated a total—she wouldn't take on a ship of this size without at *least* a dozen men.

Now let's find out if I'm right.

She felt the propeller crank up. That meant they had one Pickleman and half a dozen sooties working the auxiliary propulsion boilers. It also meant they were now high enough up to start the guidance system.

Sophronia dove into a classroom and out onto a balcony to see. Somehow she wasn't surprised to find they were heading toward London. And they weren't doing so under steam cover. The Picklemen didn't care that they would be seen by every small town they floated over. The secret of Mademoiselle Geraldine's airship school wasn't going to be a secret much longer.

If the Picklemen had any major cargo, it would be stashed in the hold with the glass elevator. Sophronia decided to check that first. She nipped around the dumbwaiters and down the access stairs. At the door, she put her ear to the jamb and heard minor thudding. She pushed it open a crack.

The hold was full of mechanimals. Bumbersnoot, passive until that moment, began upticking his tail in interest. His alarm did not sound, and he showed no particular eagerness to be put down to go to his compatriots. But he certainly was aware of them.

Sophronia's stomach sank and her cheeks tingled. These were no small dachshund-shaped creatures. These were huge monsters, similar to the

massive mechanimal she had encountered in her mother’s gazebo the night of Petunia’s ball. They bore little resemblance to any specific creature, looking more like wingless gargoyles. The hold was crammed with them. One squatted, as though waiting, on the glass lift. They did not move, but they looked like they could at any moment.

There was something terrifying about a mechanical construct that did not need a track. Sophronia had not realized that until she saw them all assembled before her. With the most prevalent mechanimal in her life being Bumbersnoot, she hadn’t thought the law making them illegal at all sensible. Now she understood. In that hold squatted a small but mighty army.

Shaken, Sophronia closed the door and continued with her assessment of the school.

She moved toward engineering, which, combined with the boiler room, took up the two lower levels of the front of the airship. She couldn’t easily sneak in there, because the main entrance was at the top, and no doubt the Picklemen would station themselves there to oversee operations. With a resigned sigh, she made her way out onto a balcony and began climbing down and around the outside of the airship toward her standard entrance—the sooties’ hatch.

There were no sooties waiting to help her inside this time. The massive room was suffused with the flickering orange of flames and a general smoky cloudiness Sophronia had grown to expect and find rather comforting. She made for her favorite coal pile, the one upon which she and Soap had spent many happy hours practicing reading and occasionally practicing smooching. Ordinarily, this part of the boiler room was humming, off-duty sooties mingled with those sent to tap the coal reserves. With only a kidnapped skeleton crew, there were no breaks, and the area was abandoned. Occasionally, Sophronia could pick out a strange new sound—a loud crack.

She peeked out from behind the coal pile to where the sooties were working the fireboxes. Or, to be more precise, where the sooties were slaving. They were running their normal patterns—feeding, stoking, checking the smooth motions of the main boilers—but they were doing so under ready punishment. The speaking-tube Pickleman was not on the supervisor’s platform, but down among the workers. He stood armed with a

bullwhip in one hand and his gun in the other. If any sootie slackened his pace or did anything the Pickleman considered amiss, the whip flashed out, striking the unfortunate boy across the back.

The sooties were grim-faced and sweating, working as hard as they could. When the whip flashed, the poor unfortunate would wince and grit his teeth but not cry out. They were tough boys who'd started on docks or up chimneys. Sootie to a floating school was a cushy job by comparison, but that didn't mean the lads had never before felt the kiss of a whip. They simply hadn't expected to do so again.

Sophronia, on the other hand, had never witnessed such a thing. Her parents weren't ones for harsh punishment, and she'd never visited the plantations of the West Indies, where, rumor had it, caning was commonplace. Every time the bullwhip struck, she winced and swallowed down a cry of sympathetic distress.

She watched as one small sootie got a second lick, right near the first. His shirt went ragged under the blows. He stumbled forward, and Handle jumped to his aid. She caught Handle's expression. It wasn't one of meek servitude. He was absolutely livid.

Whatever else her plans entailed, she had to determine a way to get them out.

Sophronia assessed the security. Apart from the Pickleman with the whip, she counted two others overseeing the carnage from above. Without a projectile weapon, she couldn't do anything right away—plus, she had to obey her training and assess the shipwide situation first. But she made the sooties a silent promise to return and free them as soon as possible.

She wondered if she could find a gun in one of the teachers' rooms. The school had an armory, of course, and Sophronia even knew where it was, but she couldn't get into it. There was no entrance without activating a special drawbridge, and only Professor Lefoux and Lady Linette knew how to do that.

She withdrew, unhappy, from the boiler room. She stuffed a few pieces of coal down her cleavage for Bumbersnoot. The stupid ball gown had no pockets, and she was running out of means to attach stuff to herself. The little mechanimal was fine at the moment, but she wanted to make certain he stayed running. Back out the hatch, she skirted up past the second level so she could continue her sweep of the ship, starting with the teachers'

rooms in the red-tassel section.

It was easier to get inside the teachers' private chambers via their balconies, so she stuck to the outside of the ship. At the very front, in the best suite, Mademoiselle Geraldine's display of fake tea cakes stood solitary vigil. The headmistress was not there. Sophronia didn't bother breaking in, as Mademoiselle Geraldine would have nothing of use.

Sister Mattie's balcony was crowded with vegetation, and her door was unlocked. The most easygoing of their teachers, Sister Mattie always felt that if she had done her job properly the students should have access to any poison they wished, not to mention good nutrition. She was also quite absentminded. Professor Lefoux's balcony was full of gadgetry, with her door triple-locked and booby-trapped. Fortunately, both locks and trap were ones Sophronia had dealt with before. She picked and disabled them. She filched a few smaller deadlier items from each teacher, poison from the one, hooks and a timepiece from the other, ribbons from both. She upended both bedrooms searching for a gun or a crossbow. No luck.

Professor Braithwope's rooms were empty of both the vampire and useful items. She searched thoroughly, but the tiny special crossbow was nowhere to be found. Probably everything else had been removed after his tether snap, to keep him from injuring himself.

Lady Linette's rooms were bolted with a Devugge system so sophisticated it presented a real challenge. Sophronia spent a futile few minutes trying to pick the lock, only to have the mechanism slide out of her way every time she felt she was getting somewhere. *Excellent design,* she thought. She might have kept at it longer, except she realized her normal training—to get in and out without being seen—was irrelevant under these particular circumstances. She used her hearing trumpet to determine that there was no one inside, and then used Bumbersnoot's bottom to shatter the stained glass of the balcony door. She then upended the chamber. *No guns at all? What kind of spymasters are these? The best kind*, she supposed, *to leave no evidence of their true nature in their private quarters.*

In one corner of Lady Linette's room, in pride of place and quite incongruously surrounded by boudoir-style velvets, sat a large wicker chicken. It was heavy, and something inside was mechanized. It smelled faintly of brimstone and chalk. Sophronia remembered a conversation her debut year about Monique being gifted with an exploding wicker chicken

from a Bunson's admirer. It would appear that Lady Linette had confiscated it—young ladies weren't allowed gifts of such magnitude. The chicken was bulky, but it was also a kind of projectile, and Sophronia was getting desperate. So, shifting Bumbersnoot around to a better angle, she used several lengths of curtain cord to strap the deadly bird to her back.

Of course, she was now nowhere near as sneaky looking. Nor, for that matter, as dignified. *Here I am, infiltrating a stolen dirigible, wearing a wicker chicken.* But she moved on, climbing to the scaffolding that supported the pilot's bubble. She knew from personal experience that it could only fit two men. So she simply took it as fact that there were two Picklemen inside and added them to her mental tally.

She moved back through the ship. The classrooms were all empty. She did find a water-projecting device filled with acid in Professor Lefoux's laboratory, which she liberated. She also put on the leather pinafore Professor Lefoux used when she was mixing chemicals. It was durable and protective, and, most important, it had pockets and a high neckline.

Sophronia didn't bother with the student residences. The enemy wouldn't be hiding there, and it would take too long to search through them all for anything useful. She contemplated returning to her own room and changing into breeches, but a certain sense of urgency convinced her she hadn't the time. Besides, the ball gown was less annoying now that she had covered it with leather. Leather, she reflected, was good like that.

The front section of the third level housed the exertion and tumbling classroom, the library, and the solar. She gave them a cursory look-through, unsurprised to find all empty. The Picklemen did not strike her as the type to enjoy physical discipline nor literary pursuits or sun exposure on a regular basis. Above her were the testing rooms and the compartments where the weapons and soldier mechanicals were stored. Assuming those were as inaccessible to the Picklemen as they were to her, Sophronia had only two zones left to explore: below her, the massive dining hall where they had been hosting the New Year's tea, and the very front forward top of the ship, back in the red-tassel section, where the administrative and record rooms stood, forgotten and unused.

It was when Sophronia reached the dining hall that everything became clear. It was impossible to sneak into the dining hall without the cover of a crowded tea party. So she took to the outer hull and peeked through one of the portholes that lined the top of the cavernous room under the crown molding. It was a great vantage point, but did not permit her to eavesdrop, only to observe. Her lip-reading ability was good, but most of the men wore beards, which made it nigh impossible. Perhaps this was on purpose? Dimity always said beards were suspicious. Now Sophronia was inclined to agree with her.

The bulk of the enemy had assembled there. Most of the tables were still up against the starboard side, but the head table was in place. It was set with salvaged food, and four Picklemen and three Cultivator-status younger men congregated around it, partaking. The younger men were acting the role of footmen, running errands, leaving the room for long periods before returning, likely being used as messengers to cohorts in the propeller room, in the boiler room, in the pilot's bubble, and on the squeak decks. These must have been the ones who had infiltrated the tea party—they looked young, and two were beardless.

A half dozen flywaymen also lurked about. Distinguished from the Picklemen by crass mannerisms and poor dress, each looked like a cross between a country squire out for the hunt and an old-fashioned pirate. By contrast, the Picklemen and their minions sported evening dress with green ribbons about their hats. Even though they were at a meal, they still wore their hats. Perhaps because it wasn't a formal engagement?

Sophronia scrutinized each man for any clue or relevant tidbit of information. Of the four Picklemen, the one in charge was distinguished by a wider ribbon around a stovepipe topper that was both taller and shiner than any other hat there. He was on the corpulent end of the spectrum, with a bushy beard and a large flat face that looked as if it had been sat on regularly. But when he stood, he moved so lightly on his feet that Sophronia knew to be wary. There was such an air of arrogance about him, and the others treated him with such respect, that he could only be the Chutney. His closest confidant was a gangly man with black hair, probably dyed, large gold spectacles, and terrible posture. He slouched over a note pad, jotting things down. The two others were heavy muscled bully boys.

Sophronia turned her attention to the flywaymen, determining which

was in charge, which might be the most dangerous, and which was the weakest. It took her a moment, but eventually she realized that one of the flywaymen wasn't a man at all. It was Madame Spetuna, dressed as a man, but making no attempt to hide her femininity. She was conducting business as if she had always worked among the enemy.

She seemed to be liaised with the flywayman commander, either as a lover or as a lieutenant, or both. Sophronia wasn't sure what this meant. Had the record room been correct? Had she betrayed them? Or was she so deep in her infiltration that any move she made to extract herself was too dangerous?

It would be very useful, thought Sophronia, *if I had someone on the inside. But do I risk trying to contact her or will that expose us both?*

It occurred to Sophronia to worry about the record room. If the flywaymen got hold of the information stored there, all active intelligencers would be in danger. *I have to destroy it before they find it*.

Sophronia withdrew from her vantage point and began climbing up. As she got closer to the squeak decks, she was scared of being seen by the lookouts, so she made her way inside as soon as she could, heading at speed for the record room. This, however, proved more challenging than expected. As vacant as the lower levels had been, the uppermost hallway was patrolled by multiple mechanicals. She recognized them as belonging to the school but suspected they had been fitted with the new crystalline valves. There was no knowing what their new protocols might command them to do if they caught her. Fortunately, there were no soldier mechanicals in the mix, but clangermaid and buttlinger models could be dangerous enough with the right instructions.

Sophronia had to employ her obstructor the entire way to the record room. It was with some relief that she finally reached the door.

She barely inched it open. A quick glance inside had her twirling away and flattening herself against the hallway wall. At one of the desks sat a Pickleman, one of intellect rather than muscle. He was hard at work dialing in the records and making copious scribbles in a small notebook.

At the far end of the hallway, 'round a bend where the tiny administrative room occupied the very front of the ship, a door banged.

"And stay there, you imbecile!" a deep voice ordered.

Footsteps came along the corridor toward Sophronia, the voice now

yelling, “Bawkin! Spice Administrator Bawkin? He wants your report immediately.”

Sophronia turned and sprinted around the next bend in the hallway. Just the other side of the corner, she flattened herself against the wall, straining to hear what was said. The door to the record room crashed open—Deep Voice was inexcusably brutal to doors—and she heard him say, “You’ve had enough time poking about. You’re wanted in the dining hall for the *next stage*.”

“But there is so much more to learn.” The answering voice was higher and tinged with Yorkshire.

“Stuff it, Spicer. Gather your things. And come back to me before you head down. I’ve a few items of interest for the Gherkin”—*That means Duke Golborne is on board! How did I miss him?*—“and some notes from my interrogation for that idiotic book of yours. The blasted runner scampered off without pause, idiot boy. Where do we get our recruits these days? Honestly, I don’t know why we bother.” From the fading volume, Deep Voice was already walking back the way he’d come.

Sophronia stuck her head around the corner.

A large wall-shaped sort of chap was striding away. He’d left the door to the record room wide open.

I could go in, wicker chicken blazing, and take Note-taker out right now. Or I can target his notebook, and steal it after he’s gotten the next bit of information from Deep Voice. Sophronia liked the second option best. Once Note-taker was on his own, headed to the Gherkin, he’d be vulnerable. Then again, if he had encountered Madame Spetuna’s record and knew who she was, the man himself must also be eliminated. Sophronia nibbled her bottom lip. *How do I sabotage a Pickleman without giving my own presence away? Right now my only real advantage is surprise. No one knows I’m on board. But I don’t want to kill the blighter.* She was capable, of course, but always found murder the least appealing part of espionage. She wasn’t squeamish, like Dimity, but she wasn’t as bloodthirsty as Preshea, either.

For now Sophronia elected to follow him until he collected more information. The intellectual chappy appeared in the record-room doorway, pulling on his coat and hat, and, notebook clutched under his arm, he headed after the other man.

Once he disappeared around a bend in the hall, Sophronia followed.

A Classical Education

The administrative room was Deep Voice's only possible location. Of course, Sophronia had explored the room before. She'd investigated most of the school by now. It was rarely used, for Mademoiselle Geraldine kept no proper administrators on staff. It was a cramped, dusty place, filled with piles of forms, bootlaces, defused mechanicals, old lesson plans, and irrelevant embroidery samplers. It was an odd place to station a Pickleman, its only advantage being a front-facing location and, perhaps, the fact that by comparison to other rooms, it was unused.

It was possible, Sophronia supposed, for an infiltrator to have been living there unnoticed for weeks. Or possibly to have stashed something important there, with no one the wiser.

She watched as Note-taker let himself inside. She then ran down the hallway after. The sign on this door read ADMINISTRATOR ACCESS ONLY, NO PEONS. Under it someone had pinned a scrap of paper that read NEEDS DUSTING. Under which someone else had penned another note scrawled with a prosaic WHY BOTHER?

Sophronia ignored the notes and took out her hearing trumpet, pressing it to the crack.

"Here, take this as well," Deep Voice was saying.

"Why on earth would I want that? You know I prefer reading to sportsmanship."

"It's not for you, idiot. It's for the Gherkin. The creature seems to think it's vital. I had a devil of a time getting it out of his claws."

“You do realize he’s insane? What’s vital to him is likely useless to the rest of us.”

“Do as you are told, Spicer. Here, take the bolts, too.”

There was a rustling noise and a funny kind of a moan.

“Shut your mouth, fang boy,” barked Deep Voice.

Ah, thought Sophronia, *I appear to have found Professor Braithwope. Unfortunately, I wasn’t the first.*

“Couldn’t you be a little kinder to the poor fellow?” said another voice, this one rich and female. “He may be lost about the mind, but I assure you he is a gentleman and *quali-tay*.”

And Mademoiselle Geraldine is here, too.

Even realizing that her teachers were in trouble, Sophronia was relieved that at least she knew they were still alive. It made her feel less isolated. By her calculations, there were fourteen Picklemen, plus three younger runners, and half a dozen flywaymen, one of whom was Madame Spetuna. Against them Sophronia had about two dozen sooties, enslaved in the boiler and propeller rooms, and now, Mademoiselle Geraldine and Professor Braithwope.

I now know all the players and their locations. At last I can start to plan.

It was unfortunate that the enemy was spread all over the ship, making them harder to eliminate *en masse*. But it had one great advantage—it slowed communication. While she had been surveying the situation, the airship had kicked up speed, and they were heading to London at the fastest float possible. Admittedly, it wasn’t very fast. Last time, the float to London took four days, but they had taken layovers and been under steam cloud cover. Pressing the issue, she thought it would be two and a half to three days.

Well, she thought, *if London is the target, at least I know I have some time.*

Not at the moment, however, for footsteps were heading toward the door. Once more she raced away. That was the one good thing about dancing slippers—at least she was soft-footed.

She heard Spice Administrator Note-taker shut the door, and she could guess what path he would take. The end of this hallway was a staircase down to the middle level. It was impossible to go directly the length of the ship on the upper level, unless one had a hurlie and the will to climb. So

Sophronia ran ahead of him, heading for the classrooms.

She chose the first classroom after the stairs, Lady Linette's. It was open, as she'd left it during her search, dark and quiet. Sophronia dropped Bumbersnoot outside the door, in the hall, with a command to stay. She could only hope he would obey. She and Vieve had never determined all of Bumbersnoot's protocols—as a result, he pretty much did as he pleased. Leaving the door ajar, Sophronia arranged herself inside the room. She opened the curtains so the moonlight would kiss her face. Then she sat down at Lady Linette's large harp, fortunately undamaged. *Staging, in seduction, is almost as vital as the seduction itself.* She dabbed a bit of lemon tincture on the floor so the scent permeated the air, and began playing softly.

Sophronia was perfectly well aware that she made the most absurd picture. She was still wearing the pinafore over her ball gown. Not to mention the fact that there was a wicker chicken strapped to her back. She angled so the chicken wasn't entirely visible, determined to make the best of the situation. She imagined its little wicker head peering over her shoulder suspiciously at the harp.

Sophronia was an abysmal harpist. She'd only had a few lessons in tinkling for torture and diversion and had done badly at those.

Nevertheless, when Note-taker came down the stairs to find the door open and a loose mechanical, how could he help but investigate? It was pure temptation.

And there he was, as predicted, peering myopically into Lady Linette's classroom.

The room alone was a shock to anyone, being a combination of conservatory, boudoir, and house of ill repute. It featured a good deal of red fringe, highly questionable artwork, and long velvet fainting couches shoved to one side by the crash. Lady Linette appeared to have evacuated her three fluffy cats, so at least they weren't in residence giving Sophronia's harping the yowls it deserved.

Sophronia looked up, arrested, as if caught on canvas by a master painter. She used the moonlight and the angle to her advantage, targeting an ethereal effect. She stopped playing as though interrupted in deep reverie. She floated one white hand gracefully up to push back a stray lock of hair, still maintaining its curl despite the trials of the evening. This exposed her

neck, which Lady Linette said was a sign of vulnerability.

“Oh, dear.” Sophronia gave a tremulous smile. “Did my playing disturb you, sir? I do apologize.” Tremulous smiles were very effective when applied to the right victim.

Nothing could be more confusing to the poor man than Sophronia at that moment. He fell back on etiquette. What else was an Englishman to do when confronted with a wicker-chicken-wearing leather-clad tremulous smile? He drew the only ready weapon he had—manners. “Good evening, miss…” He trailed off.

Sophronia rose, sweetly innocent, and moved toward him as if she were a ballerina.

He, in turn, stepped into the room, as politeness demanded. Bumbersnoot scuttled in after, looking pleased with himself. He went to snuffle about the fringed carpet to see if it might be susceptible to singeing.

“Miss Pelouse. How do you do? Are you visiting for the party?” Sophronia’s voice was breathy—due to the euphoria of her own transformative harp playing, of course.

The young man had a largish nose and floppy hair and the appealing gawkish posture of the literary-minded. He might also, Sophronia realized, have a gun. Difficult for him to reach for it, however, as he was carrying his notebook in one hand and Professor Braithwope’s miniature crossbow and three bolts in the other.

He clearly did not know what to do when approached by a pretty young lady wearing a wicker chicken who ought—by all standards of decency—to be long abandoned on the moor… chickenless.

Sophronia held out her hand, as if she were a bishop and wished it to be kissed.

The young Pickleman fumbled, his arms full, to finagle an appropriate response. He managed a truncated sort of bow over the offering. “Spice Administrator Bawkin, miss, how do you do? Is that your mechanimal?”

Sophronia gave him a perfect curtsy and then cocked her head, inquisitive. “Mechanimal? Where?” Bumbersnoot had conveniently rejected the fringe and was poking about the back side of the coal scuttle, out of view.

The young man abandoned that line of questioning for one of greater import. “Um, miss, how did you get here?”

Sophronia floated her fingers about in a dancer's confusion. "I walked. You would suggest some other method?"

"No, I mean, miss, the ship was *evacuated*."

"Dear me, was it? I hadn't noticed. I do get lost in my music. It is my one true passion. Do you have a *one true passion*, Mr. Spice-Bawkin?" Sophronia prattled in an airy-fairy manner. She did not let him answer. "Mine is music. I simply adore music. *Je l'adore, je l'adore!* It's so *transporting*, don't you find? Of course you do. Everyone does. When I sit at my harp, the world simply melts away. Like, you know, that creamy icy thing that melts. What am I thinking of? Oh, yes, Nesselrode pudding. I'm afraid it may have melted too far just now, and I missed something important. An evacuation, you say? Are you the authorities? Have we been evacuated for political reasons? Oh, I always knew they would go too far."

"Who?" interjected the young Pickleman, almost desperately, overwhelmed by her blathering.

Sophronia was breezy and dismissive, "Oh, you know, *they*." All the while she chattered, she pressed the young man around and back, moving him into position by slightly crowding his social space. So vested was he in keeping the correct distance for conversation with a lady that he didn't even realize he had been moved until he came up against Lady Linette's mantelpiece, where her prized stuffed badger in a lace mobcap stared austerely down at him.

"Miss," he interrupted again, "why are you wearing a chicken?"

"Oh, this old thing? It's the very latest fashion accessory. Don't you like it? Mine is a bit big, I grant you. I was going to put it into my hair, but it was too heavy. You don't like it? I'm so foolish." She widened her green eyes as though she might burst into tears.

"Of course. I mean, I do like it. It's very, um, bendy."

Sophronia's lips trembled and her eyes welled.

The young man leaned in, solicitous.

She said, "I really am very sorry about this. You seem like such a *nice* man."

"You are? I do? Well, they should have found you after the evacuation. We sent a sweep around."

"My fault entirely, I assure you. I've never trusted chimney sweeps." Sophronia allowed one perfect tear to trickle over her cheek, staring up into

his confused face with an expression of mild adoration mixed with shame.

The poor young Pickleman. He'd had no chance from the moment he entered the room. If there were a book on befuddlement with evil intent, Sophronia had just thrown it at him.

At which point she hauled off and hit him with it.

Or, to be more precise, she hit him with Lady Linette's copy of Mrs. Blessingbacon's *Hot Cross Buns for the Bunless*. It was a heavy tome that Lady Linette had left sitting atop her mantelpiece and that had managed not to fall off during the crash.

Sophronia whacked the Pickleman on the temple, precisely where she had been taught.

Spice Administrator Bawkin fell to the ground in a pleasingly floppy manner.

"That'll teach you to question a lady's wicker chicken!"

It was hard to know how much time she had while he was incapacitated —only a few seconds if she'd done her job right. She hadn't wanted to cause permanent damage. He might work for the Picklemen, but he didn't seem *that* bad.

Luckily, Lady Linette had a passion for lace drapes, gold cord, and velvet runners. Sophronia converted one of the runners into a gag. She tied the Pickleman's hands over his head and to the leg of the grand piano. She had always thought it odd, not to mention a waste of weight, that Lady Linette insisted on a grand piano in her classroom. But in this instance it proved useful. With Bawkin's wrists tied to one leg, and his feet to the leg kitty corner, he was efficiently immobilized. Sophronia found a large shawl and draped it over the piano, anchoring it with vases. Now, should anyone look into the room, it would appear empty, the young man well hidden behind the shawl.

Sophronia now suspected that Lady Linette had a piano on board for exactly this purpose. Feeling safe for the moment, and wanting to make certain he would wake up, Sophronia shut the door. Bumbersnoot reappeared from behind the coal scuttle, looking smug, as if he had found some loose coal. She scooped up the young man's notebook and held it in the moonlight to examine it.

The first section was filled with notes in cypher, some mathematical equations, sketches of mechanical functions, and a rough map of something

mysterious. In the middle there were newer notes—messy and smudged from a hasty closing of the book. Still in cypher, the style of the text suggested names and dates combined with other pertinent information. This must be from the record room, probably an account of active intelligencers. Sophronia tore those pages out of the book.

"Bumbersnoot, come here, please."

The little mechanimal tick-tocked over to her.

Sophronia fed him the sheets of paper, one at a time, making certain they went into his boiler and were incinerated.

There was one page of additional notes after that, even more hastily written, in a different hand. The results of Deep Voice's interrogation, Sophronia supposed.

The rest of the book was blank. She extracted her own stick of graphite and drew a hasty schematic of the ship, marking off the locations of Picklemen and flywaymen with dots. She took great satisfaction in then putting an X through the dot representing Spice Administrator Bawkin. One down, thirteen Picklemen, three runners, and five flywaymen to go. She tore out this map, folded it up, and put it in a pocket with her stick of graphite. Then she ripped out the rest of the notes, rolled them up tight, and secured them with a bit of ribbon. She removed Bumbersnoot's coal reserves from her cleavage to a pocket of the leather smock, and stuffed the notes there instead. Most secure place for them.

Even though the remainder of the notebook was empty, she tucked it under some couch cushions for safety. One never knew with Picklemen.

She then examined the crossbow, delighted to have it in her possession. If she could activate the soldier mechanicals, she would have a real weapon on her side. But she'd probably need Professor Braithwope for that, and who knew what mental state he was in at this point. Sophronia cannibalized a length of curtain cord to be a belt and tied the tiny crossbow to it, using more hair ribbons. Geraldine's girls carried extra hair ribbons at all times for exactly this kind of eventuality. She shoved the bolts into the biggest of the pinafore pockets. She practically jangled like a tinker with all the items she had hanging off her, but she felt much better about life in general. She took a moment to rearrange and redistribute so she wouldn't make noise as she snuck about.

She ducked under the piano and checked on the Spice Administrator. He

was awake and his pupils looked fine. He lay perfectly still as she loomed over him.

She grinned, unaware of the maniacal expression in her green eyes. “Love of music—it can drive a girl to distraction. Or do I mean destruction?”

She patted his cheek in what she hoped was a reassuring way and left him. Poor thing hadn’t even squirmed or groaned around the gag. She was certain he thought her quite mad. And should he somehow get free—and he would have to be a circus contortionist with supernatural strength to do so—he would have such a strange story to tell, it would make the other Picklemen think him drunk at best. “A girl wearing a wicker chicken and playing the harp bopped me with a book about buns and then stuffed me under a piano.” It sounded like a funny dream.

Sophronia chuckled to herself but quickly sobered. Professor Braithwope and Mademoiselle Geraldine needed rescuing, and she still had sooties to save. She headed back up the stairs for her next victim. Deep Voice, she felt, was going to be much harder to disable.

This time Sophronia did not wear the chicken. She took it off and left it in the hallway outside the administrative room with the crossbow and Bumbersnoot and orders to guard. She armed herself with the water-projecting device filled with acid from Professor Lefoux’s laboratory. Then she took out her small hoard of nibbles from the kitchen and knocked on the door.

“Come!” called Deep Voice.

Sophronia entered, eyes down, looking at the Pickleman through her lashes, pleased to find he had not been joined by any others.

“Who the devil are you?” He was a rough-looking fellow, his jaw dark with a nascent beard.

Sophronia had never seen such a thing as a seedling beard before, no gardener having tended it to greatness nor pruned it into submission. It was positively oafish in its incivility. She actually felt unwell at the sight.

“Only the maid, sir. I’ve brought you food.” She proffered her own cheese, bread, and apple.

The man looked suspicious but also off balance—unable to decide whether to leave off what he was doing and approach or allow her to enter farther into the room.

Sophronia took his hesitation as an opportunity to assess the situation.

Mademoiselle Geraldine was sitting in a big chair in the far left corner, near the forward window, several large storage baskets pushed aside to make room. Before her was a low table set for tea. There was an empty seat across from her, shoved out of the way as if in haste. The headmistress looked so relaxed, Sophronia had the horrified thought that she was working with the Picklemen.

I have two enemies to disable, and only one ally to rescue, when I was prepared for the other way around! Sophronia cursed herself. It was a debut's mistake.

Deep Voice was in the other corner of the room next to a cage shaped like a bird's, only bigger. It hung from a hook in the ceiling and looked to be steel, woven through with a glass tubing filled with gas. This heated the metal red hot at multiple contact points.

Professor Braithwope was locked inside this cage, naked.

Sophronia quickly slid her eyes away, but not before she noticed welts on the vampire's arms, burns on his hands, and open cuts across his face. His mustache looked to have fainted. He was silent, half curled, half crouched—trying to make himself as small as possible so as not to touch the burning bars. Vampires, of course, could survive most things, but they still felt pain. The cuts, no doubt, were made with sharpened wooden blades and would be slower to heal as a result.

Deep Voice, orchestrator of this torture, left off prodding the professor and walked over to Mademoiselle Geraldine and the tea table.

When Sophronia moved to take the food to that table, he snapped, "Halt! You stay there."

Sophronia froze.

With a studied casualness, the Pickleman poured tea. Which made Sophronia realize that everything wasn't right with the headmistress. Mademoiselle Geraldine would never let a *visitor* pour, even if that man was her superior. It was *always* the hostess's responsibility to serve tea, evacuations and hijackings notwithstanding.

Sophronia lifted her lashes slightly to take in details she had missed

earlier.

Mademoiselle Geraldine was strapped into her chair at the elbows and legs. She could raise up her hands to feed herself from a plate in her lap but was otherwise immobilized. The headmistress was behaving in a civilized manner, but she was not assisting the invaders. She was a hostage.

The headmistress looked at Sophronia with an expression of sublime indifference, showing absolutely no indication that they had ever met before.

Bravo, thought Sophronia.

All this time the students thought Mademoiselle Geraldine ignorant of the fact that her own school was an espionage academy. They had always acted to keep her immersed in that ignorance. In fact, it was a vital part of their training. Sophronia had wondered… but now she outright knew that Mademoiselle Geraldine had been in on it all along. She was too calm to be an ordinary headmistress tied to a chair. By rights, she ought to be in hysterics.

The Pickleman finished pouring the tea and handed a cup to Mademoiselle Geraldine, taking away her empty plate. Then he served himself and sat down, turning to face Sophronia. “I do not recall any maids being brought aboard, except mechanical ones. Who are you really, girl?”

“A forgotten student.” Sophronia dropped the act and pocketed the food. She was grateful that she didn’t have to use it. It was all she had to eat. At the same time, she palmed the acid emitter and let her other hand rest on her bladed fan, ready with either. She minimized any appearance of threat by hunching and keeping her eyes down timidly.

“Come in then, and have some tea. Pull up a stool. You realize, of course, that I must take you prisoner.” The Pickleman was confident in his own superiority.

Sophronia could hardly believe it. Surely he knew what this school did? Surely he didn’t see her as weak? But, then again, this was part of her education, to play on the perceptions, particularly of men. Girls were not dangerous.

She grabbed a pouf from a pile of rejected furniture and pulled up between him and Mademoiselle Geraldine at the table.

“You’re a pretty little thing, aren’t you?” He extracted an extra cup and saucer from a nearby tea trolley.

Sophronia considered herself only passing fair, but if he liked his ladies lean and muddy of hair and eyes, she wasn't going to gainsay him. "Very kind of you to say so, sir."

The man picked up the teapot, and Sophronia, with an apology to the tea gods for the waste, sprang at the man, animal-like. She had the acid spray pointed at him in one hand, and her trusty fan was open, leather guard flicked off, in the other.

The acid hit him first. It took the Pickleman a split second to react to her attack. That was often the problem with big thuggish men—they were slow.

Then he yelled, both hands flying to scrape at his face, dropping the teapot in his distress. This spilled hot liquid in his lap, which caused him to scream again. He fell backward in the chair, getting tangled up in its arms and legs. By which time Sophronia was on top of him. This was not a womanly maneuver, and he was certainly strong enough to toss her off, except that she had her fan pressed to his jugular. She made certain to prick his skin so there was no doubt as to the danger.

He was crying openly and wiping his eyes, but he stopped the moment he felt the sharp metal against his throat.

"May I suggest that you stay quite still, sir?" Sophronia was careful not to forget her manners. After all, the headmistress was right there. Her voice was deadly confident. "You, I do not feel so kindly toward as I did my last victim."

"What? Who?" He shuddered, wanting desperately to toss her off.

Sophronia pocketed the acid without looking away. She brought her free hand to his neck, above where her fan pricked. She pressed down firm and steady, cutting into his air intake, listening for the wheeze.

"Don't you worry about him, sir. He's all taken care of. And now I'll be taking care of you, too." Without turning, Sophronia asked, "Mademoiselle Geraldine, do you think you can scoot your chair over here? I have a knife somewhere, for your bonds."

Mademoiselle Geraldine's voice replied, "No need, my dear. I've had them undone for some time."

Sophronia was unsurprised, but she did not look up. "I suggest you unlock Professor Braithwope, then. We are, after all, enjoying tea. I should think he'd be grateful for a drop or two of the warm stuff himself, what with Professor Lefoux gone these many hours."

“My dear girl, what a cracking idea.” There was a rustle of skirts as the headmistress moved around the prone Pickleman, feeling about his waistcoat for the keys. The man twitched. Sophronia pressed down with both her hands. A trickle of blood appeared from under the edge of her fan. Good. That would draw Professor Braithwope’s attention.

Deep Voice fell still.

The click and clang of the cage being unlocked followed, and then a faint hiss and the smell of escaping gas.

“He tapped this contraption into our own gas lighting lines—quite ingenious, actually.” Mademoiselle Geraldine seemed most impressed. “Best way to hold a vampire at short notice. Ah, there we are, my dear Professor. Right this way. We’ve prepared a light repast for you to enjoy after such a trying evening. I shall find your robe, shall I?”

A force slammed into Sophronia, pushing her violently aside. She rolled with it, away from the tea table, coming up to her feet, still holding the fan at the ready.

While Professor Braithwope might be insane by most standards, his feeding instincts functioned fine. They would be the last to go in any creature, Sophronia supposed. Although his table manners did leave something to be desired. This was only a casual tea, yet he was positively animalistic in his slurping.

The prone Pickleman writhed and gurgled but could do nothing to stop the vampire. Even weakened from torture, and having been confined without sustenance, Professor Braithwope was more than a match for a mere human. Not to mention the fact that after losing blood himself to the wooden knife of this captor, his urge to feed must be overwhelming. Really, the Pickleman had brought this on himself.

Mademoiselle Geraldine joined Sophronia, carrying Professor Braithwope’s yellow banyan robe and looking on with complete indifference.

“It is troubling when a civilized creature becomes so gutfoundered he forgets technique. I had a fancy man like that once.”

“Oh?” Sophronia was wildly curious, but the headmistress left it there.

The two ladies watched silently until Mademoiselle Geraldine added, “One ought to look away in disgust, I suppose.”

“Agreed,” said Sophronia. “But the one is our enemy and the other mad

—we must think to our own skins.”

“Well put, young lady.” Mademoiselle Geraldine spoke to her as if she were almost an equal. It was charming. “You have a plan?”

“Of a kind.” Sophronia handed the headmistress her spare knife, filched from the kitchen, and the remaining acid. “Keep an eye on things here for a moment, would you, please?”

Mademoiselle Geraldine nodded.

Sophronia nipped out, retrieved Bumbersnoot and his two charges, and returned, shutting and locking the door behind her.

“Do we let him feed the man dry?” The headmistress’s tone was conversational.

Sophronia frowned. “I trust to your judgment in this. I will say, however, that if we did so, a man would be dead, and you likely know better than I how many legal issues always arise from that.”

The headmistress sniffed. “He wasn’t very nice to poor Professor Braithwope.”

“Perhaps we should ask him, then.”

“Excellent notion.” Mademoiselle Geraldine shook the vampire by the shoulder. “Oh, Professor?”

No response. The Pickleman was extremely pale under that seedling beard and looking husklike from lack of blood.

“Please, Headmistress. Allow me.” Sophronia snapped open the lid of her flask of lemon-infused tincture and dabbed a generous amount onto the vampire’s nose.

Nothing happened for a moment.

Then Professor Braithwope sneezed violently, which forced him to unhook his fangs from the Pickleman’s neck.

“Professor, dear,” said Mademoiselle Geraldine, “I have your robe. Do put it on.”

The vampire straightened, dazed but now free of any evidence of torture. All his wounds were healed. One could see this, of course, because he was still without clothing. He turned to face them.

Sophronia and the headmistress got a good view of all matters at that juncture.

Sophronia couldn’t entirely hold back a squeak. It was so surprising. “Goodness. Well, I always told my mother this school provided a

comprehensive lesson plan. It is a good thing she did not realize how comprehensive." She did not turn away, however. A lady of good breeding wasn't afforded many in-person anatomy lessons, not even at Mademoiselle Geraldine's.

Professor Braithwope struck an Adonis pose. "I was sculpted in marble. Did you know? I was once thought quite the fashion."

The headmistress smiled and draped the yellow robe about the vampire's shoulders. "Unfortunately, my dear man, this is England in the modern age, and you really must wear clothing. How would we otherwise get any work done? Such a distraction. And what will I tell this young lady's mother?" Even though the Pickleman was barely conscious, Mademoiselle Geraldine was careful not to use Sophronia's name.

If Sophronia had lingering doubts about the headmistress being a trained intelligencer, they were now put to rest.

"You tell her that her daughter got a bang-up classical education," replied the vampire.

Sophronia didn't entirely understand the subtext, but Mademoiselle Geraldine found this hilarious.

The vampire shrugged into his banyan, tying its fringed sash tight about his waist. Sophronia breathed a sigh of relief. It had been a bit much.

Mademoiselle Geraldine moved the conversation on. "Forgive me, Professor, but your meal? What should we do about him?"

The vampire looked at the prostrate man. "I'm full now." His tone was childlike.

Sophronia considered the problem. "We can't leave him. He will eventually tell what he knows."

"And what is that?" wondered Mademoiselle Geraldine.

"That I am here, that you two are free, that I've already eliminated one other man, and that I intend to eliminate more."

"Ah. I see. Your thoughts, Professor?"

"Every man should fly once in his lifetime." The vampire's mustache had recovered from its faint and was puffy with malcontent.

"Out the window, you think? Well, if you would do the honors." In an aside, Mademoiselle Geraldine said to Sophronia, "We have a good excuse, that way. He could have simply fallen off."

The vampire lifted the prostrate Pickleman. The headmistress opened a

large porthole on one side, behind a pile of leaflets, and without ceremony, the vampire stuffed him through it.

Sophronia preferred not to think about the man falling to the countryside below. Even had he survived the bite, he would not survive that. *Death*, she thought, *laid at my door.* Absurdly, her brain fixated on the man's appalling grooming habits. At least she wouldn't have to look at that beardlet ever again.

She then found she wanted rather badly to cast up her accounts. But her stomach was empty. She could only hide the fact that she was retching by turning away and covering her mouth with her fan. That only caused her to notice the blood on the blade. She cleaned it hastily with her red doily, the one they were always supposed to carry with them but were never told why.

"My dear girl, was that…? Surely not. Your first finishing?" The headmistress took her arm, solicitously. "Come, I believe there is a little tea left in the pot. You look as though you could use a drop."

The teapot, on its side where the Pickleman had dropped it, did indeed still contain a splash of tea. It was enough for a much-needed, and very fortifying, tiny cupful.

Sophronia sipped it gratefully.

"There, that's the color back in your cheeks." Mademoiselle Geraldine patted her shoulder.

Professor Braithwope joined them, drawing up Sophronia's former pouf and perching on it like an odd buttercup-colored walrus. He seemed utterly harmless in his yellow quilted robe, his mustache bristling with satisfaction.

Sophronia had a difficult time looking at him.

"So, my dear, what's the occupation situation?" asked Mademoiselle Geraldine.

Sophronia felt better at the question. This was something she was prepared for, that she was equipped to handle with skill and training.

"I have a map for that." She reached into her pocket.

NOT WITH A BANG BUT A WICKER

They had to study the map at length in order to formulate a satisfactory plan of action.

It was Mademoiselle Geraldine who called a halt to the proceedings. “We should move. They may send a runner up here to find out what’s happened to our airborne friend.”

Sophronia nodded. “They are less likely to search student quarters, although with two men missing, they ought to begin a room-by-room sweep. That’s what I would do.”

“Do they have the manpower for that?” asked the headmistress.

Sophronia grinned, looking feral. “Not if we keep hounding them.”

“I see why you were recruited, my dear.”

No sooner had she spoken than one of the young fresh-faced Pickleman runners appeared, banging on the door to the administrative room, demanding entrance.

Professor Braithwope made quick work of him, not with his fangs this time, thank goodness. Instead, he merely whipped open the door and bopped him on the chin with a fist.

“We can’t keep throwing them overboard,” objected Sophronia when the vampire lifted the boy to carry him to the porthole.

“Can’t keep them, either. Someone might find and release them.” Mademoiselle Geraldine was more bloodthirsty than anyone might have imagined.

“I’m not all that hungry.” The professor looked with mild interest at the

young man’s white neck, exposed by his lolling head and poorly tied cravat. “But I’d be willing to try. Only you, dear ladies, could turn me to gluttony.” He sounded almost sane—his mustache looked disciplined.

“I have an idea.” Sophronia grabbed the length of rope previously used to tie Mademoiselle Geraldine to her chair. “Bring him along, please, Professor, and I’ll show you.”

They left the administrative room. Mademoiselle Geraldine carefully locked it behind them. She had recovered her keys from Deep Voice.

On their way to student quarters, Sophronia demonstrated how to bind, gag, and tie the young man outside, under the balcony of one of the classrooms. He was effectively invisible from all sides, except where the rope showed at the bottom of the rails. Unless someone stepped out onto a lower balcony and looked up, he’d be impossible to spot. He resembled nothing so much as a suckling pig trussed for roasting, dangling from under the eaves of a porch.

“That should do, don’t you think?”

“Indubitably,” agreed Mademoiselle Geraldine. “It’s a capital solution for the future, as well. If we can disable and truss every Pickleman, we won’t have to kill any more. What do you think, Professor?”

“All of them? Can’t I have a little nibble now and again, whot?”

“Of course you can, dear.” Mademoiselle Geraldine patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

He brightened. “Jolly good.” Professor Braithwope was proving unexpectedly helpful. They could only hope his lucidity lasted.

“We’re going to need a lot of rope.” Sophronia led the way out toward the stern and the student residential area. She had her obstructor at the ready, in case they encountered malicious mechanicals, and her bladed fan open, in case they encountered malicious Picklemen. Mademoiselle Geraldine brought up the rear. The vampire walked between them so they could keep an eye on him.

Suddenly the vampire lurched at Sophronia.

“My bow!” he cried, fixated on the small crossbow dangling from Sophronia’s improvised belt.

“Now, Professor.” Sophronia scrabbled for some kind of logic he would understand. “Don’t you think it goes so much better with my outfit than yours?”

The vampire blinked, looking down at his own yellow sleeve. The bow, which was a dark mahogany color, did indeed go well with her leather-covered red-and-black dinner gown.

“Oh, very well,” said the vampire petulantly.

They continued down the hallway, finally reaching the suite of rooms set aside for Sophronia’s year group. She opened the door and gestured to the others to enter.

Sophronia hissed in an aside to the headmistress as she passed, “Do you have the codes as well as the keys?”

“Codes?”

“To activate the soldier mechanicals.”

“You think that’s wise? After all, the soldier mechanicals are still mechanicals, and the Picklemen are in control of *them*.”

“I don’t think Lady Linette would be so foolish as to install new valves in the school’s only major defense system. After all, it’s the valve that is the true danger.”

“That could be perceived as naïve, my dear. The valve is only their latest endeavor. They could have been planning this for a very long time, in which case even the most primitive models are suspect.”

The headmistress moved into the parlor and collapsed onto a small chaise longue while Sophronia locked and bolted the door. She also set up a noise trap, using a propped chair and Dimity’s hair receiver. When they roomed together, the ugly little pot used to drive Sophronia crazy. If it got broken when someone opened the door, so much the better.

“Should we go into my private sleeping chamber? Even safer there.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine extracted herself from the chaise with a groan and followed Sophronia into her tiny bedroom. Professor Braithwope trotted behind like an eager puppy.

That door safely locked as well, Sophronia relaxed a little.

She pulled out the map, pointing to the locations of the enemy and explaining her dots. She crossed out the dot that represented Deep Voice and one of the dots for the runners.

“Now, if Professor Braithwope could handle whatever is going on in the pilot’s bubble? I’m remembering how well he dances the support beam.”

The vampire was hopping after Bumbersnoot, wiggling his nose and making bunny noises. Bumbersnoot was not amused.

The headmistress said, “He will require supervision.”

Sophronia nodded and pointed to the squeak decks. “I was thinking you could take out the two up top. They have guns, so they are a bigger risk. Are you prepared for that?”

The headmistress nodded. “I think so. Physical attacks were never my strong point, and I’m afraid of heights—that’s why I stay inside all the time. But I’m willing to try.”

Sophronia couldn’t help being a little admiring. It was as if Mademoiselle Geraldine were an entirely different person. “Headmistress, you really are a remarkable actress.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine blushed. “Thank you, my dear. I might have been great, you know, quite great. But there’s more money and less risk in espionage work.”

Sophronia was startled. “Than the theater?”

“Oh my, yes, dear. Horribly dangerous, the West End. Have you ever spent any length of time in the company of dramatic artistic types?”

“Not unless you count Lord Akeldama.”

“Well, then, there you go.” Much to Sophronia’s disappointment, she didn’t elaborate.

So Sophronia returned to the plan. “I thought I would go after the dining hall contingent. We need to cut off the head—then chaos should result. That should make freeing the sooties much easier.”

The headmistress looked at the map. “But the dining hall is where most of the enemy is! I can’t let you do that. You’re only a student.”

“Ah, but I have the chicken.” Sophronia gestured at the exploding poultry, which was currently reclining on her bed in the wicker chicken version of a seductive pose. Sophronia grinned at her own thoughts—she was beginning to give it a personality.

Mademoiselle Geraldine was uncomfortable with the risk. She might be treating Sophronia as an equal, but she still harbored remnants of teacherly concern. “You should take Professor Braithwope with you. How about you supervise the professor and the bubble while I handle the squeak deck?”

Sophronia considered. “Then we all hit the propeller room and free up some sooties? Recruit them to our cause.”

The headmistress contemplated the numbers. “No, that leaves the bulk of the enemy with time to regroup. I think you were right with the first plan

—the dining room and squeak decks must be first.”

The discussion continued on toward dawn, at which juncture two of the three conspirators felt like they had a plan. What Professor Braithwope thought was anyone’s guess. He had given up on Bumbersnoot hours ago and was humming to himself while looking through Sophronia’s dresses.

Sophronia’s eyes were heavy lidded.

Mademoiselle Geraldine yawned behind her hand.

Nevertheless, they persisted until the headmistress pointed out that Professor Braithwope had curled up inside the bottom of Sophronia’s wardrobe, on top of her shoes, and fallen asleep. He looked, as was the custom, mostly dead. The sun must be properly up.

With a shrug, Sophronia shut the wardrobe door. Best to keep out as much light as possible.

“Whatever else, we must be coordinated.” The headmistress gave a small sigh. “And we need the vampire.”

Sophronia nodded. “Agreed.”

“So we must hide out here for the day.”

Sophronia didn’t like that, for it left the sooties enslaved for that much longer. Not to mention that Madame Spetuna was in danger.

“You think they’ll search the ship again, with three gone and us missing?” Mademoiselle Geraldine moved the wicker chicken off the bed. “Make room there, handsome.”

“It’s possible.” Sophronia tugged up the low neckline of her bodice in a now ubiquitous adjustment. “Then again, it’s likely making them nervous, which means they’ll make mistakes.”

“We can only hope so. And now, you look dead on your feet, dear. Get out of that dress and get some sleep. I’ll take first watch.”

Sophronia wasn’t certain if she was happier to be out of the blasted ball gown or to be in bed. Both were accomplished rather more rapidly than delicacy dictated, but if Mademoiselle Geraldine chastised her for it, she didn’t hear.

Sophronia slept until well past noon.

Then she sat watch while the headmistress slept, waking her before

sunset.

Mademoiselle Geraldine got out of bed with her red hair wildly tousled and her face paint smeared. She made some desultory repairs, using Sophronia's small vanity and meager stores of rouge, but emerged looking somewhat like Lady Macbeth after the speech with the spoon. Or was it a knife?

Luckily, Sophronia still had the food she'd filched from the kitchen. Also, Dimity had a mound of tea nibbles set aside to take to the sooties. It was mostly cake, but better than nothing. They ate all of it, hoping they'd have an opportunity to steal more when they were out that evening.

Sophronia would have given a great deal for a decent cup of tea. She even contemplated sneaking down to the kitchen to brew herself a pot. She thought she could teach herself how. But even tea wasn't worth the risk—dire straits indeed.

She fed a lump of coal to Bumbersnoot while they waited for the vampire to rise.

This time Sophronia wore her boy's garb. Mademoiselle Geraldine made no comment at seeing one of her students in rolled-up trousers and a man's shirt and vest. Sophronia put the leather pinafore back on, liking the protection and all the pockets. She then checked over her devices and weapons. Everything was sharp and in good working order. She went about finding what kit she could for Mademoiselle Geraldine as well, filching stuff from Dimity, Agatha, and Preshea with a silent apology for entering their private chambers. She thought her two friends probably wouldn't mind. Preshea's room yielded up a wide variety of potions, poultices, and poisons, all neatly labeled, a selection of which Sophronia intended to put to good use.

She consulted with Mademoiselle Geraldine about the soldier mechanical codes, her best guess on how to activate the wicker chicken, and if there were any guns available. Then they fell silent. Plans already made and espionage in order, they had little in common and no other conversation. It seemed silly to fall back on the weather at a time like this. Sophronia might have asked the headmistress about her past or how she had managed to keep up the charade of ignorance so long, but she thought Mademoiselle Geraldine would resort to absurdities about the theater again. Sophronia couldn't take theatrical talk on only five hours' sleep.

The vampire emerged from the wardrobe looking mercurial and refreshed.

“Ladies.” His tone was one of surprise. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company first thing in the morning?”

“Evening, good sir,” corrected Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“Is it? How droll. I have slept the day away?” He looked thoughtful. “I’m starving. Any tea?”

“Don’t you mean blood, Professor?” Sophronia was gentle with him.

“Blood, whot? No. Or. Yes. Ah, vampire. Right. Why did I do that?”

“You wanted to live forever?” It was the only reason Sophronia could conceive.

“Did I? How curious of me. Yes, drop of blood would be nice right about now. You offering, pretty lady? Or, um, is it lad?”

“No.” Sophronia’s tone was flat, and she tilted her head at Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“Oh, me, neither, Professor, but we do have some gentlemen in mind for your breakfast. If you’d like to follow me. There may be a bit of tightrope walking involved, but I’m sure you aren’t averse.”

“Whot? Tightrope, you say? How lovely. Used to be quite the carnival artist in my day, did you know that?”

“Yes indeed, Professor. That’s why you came on board my school, remember? The only vampire to tether the skies. Said you liked heights too much to stick to the ground and you’d take the risk.”

“Did I? Well, there you have it.” He trotted after Mademoiselle Geraldine.

Sophronia left the room with no little reluctance. It had felt like sanctuary for that one day. Even if the safe feeling was false, she had enjoyed it. She could not deny her love of adventure, not after the last few years, but right now she almost understood Pillover’s reluctance. Nevertheless, she had a ship to save and possibly a nation. She shifted the wicker chicken on her back and checked that Bumbersnoot was dangling over her shoulder. He wagged his tail at her.

They were off.

Over halfway to London, thought Sophronia. The small town far below had gas streetlamps. She couldn't tell exactly where they were—possibly near Salisbury—but they were definitely making good time. They were now floating over increasingly populated areas.

Sophronia imagined reports in the local papers concerning a massive chubby dirigible spotted in the skies. Was the government spying on them? Or was it an invading enemy? The papers could get hysterical about such a thing.

She was surprised that they hadn't yet come under investigation by local authorities. Surely some of the wealthier districts kept their own investigative dirigibles for use by the constabulary? Or perhaps they had approached and the Picklemen had eliminated them.

Mademoiselle Geraldine and Professor Braithwope had disappeared to see about the pilot's bubble. After that, they would take out the two gunmen on the squeak decks. Sophronia had suggested Mademoiselle Geraldine get herself a gun first. The headmistress had muttered something mysterious about visiting her chambers and not needing a gun after that. Sophronia let her be mysterious—she had a dining hall to liberate.

She approached it with caution, heading for one of the side entrances. As hoped, the Picklemen inside were nervously running about, wondering why their men were missing. Accusations were being hurled back and forth in loud voices.

Sophronia let the door open wide enough for her observe as much as possible. This allowed her to learn something of the Pickleman plot. They did intend to use the pilot's bubble to control all the mechanicals in London. There was something about the way Mademoiselle Geraldine's pilot mechanical was designed that allowed it to transmit to multiple mechanicals at once. Or more precisely, transmit to all those fitted with the new valve. *That makes sense*, thought Sophronia. *After all, the school boasts a huge number of mechanized staff that always work in consort without crashing.* There was some feeling that if the ship were high enough, near the aether, the Picklemen might even be able to extend the reach to the whole of Southern England. The Chutney found this idea very exciting.

When the flow of men became concentrated around the high table, bent over some kind of chart, the flywaymen nearby craning their necks to see, Sophronia took a breath and entered the room. She clutched the wicker

chicken to her chest, one hand on the trigger.

No one noticed her for what felt like a long time, although it could only have been a minute or two. Then again, she did look like a boy, so she didn't stand out as much as she might have ordinarily. She'd used some of Bumbersnoot's coal reserves to smudge up her face. They might think, at first, she was an escaped sootie.

Madame Spetuna was the first to notice Sophronia. In that first flash of recognition Sophronia realized she had maligned the woman in thinking she would betray the school. Madame Spetuna looked horrified to see her and made a frantic hand motion for Sophronia to *get out.*

Sophronia pointed at the chicken and mouthed *explodes*, making a bursting gesture with her free hand.

Madame Spetuna's eyebrows rose up, and she made a quick toss motion and pointed to herself. She clearly wanted to be in charge of the chicken.

Sophronia was frozen by indecision. It was awfully tempting to give up the responsibility to an experienced intelligencer. Then again, the chicken was her burden. But Madame Spetuna would know better how it should be deployed.

While she tried to decide what to do, Madame Spetuna turned and said something that drew everyone's attention. It was a bold move, designed to protect Sophronia and keep her unnoticed that much longer.

Sophronia was charmed, but wished she hadn't bothered. Because in that moment she saw suspicion suffuse the Chutney's face.

"I always thought it silly to have a female on board with us. After all, any woman could be working for the enemy."

"Now, now," said the head flywayman, "I vouched for her."

"And your cooperation was predicated on us allowing her aboard. And yet my men have been going missing. The prisoners have not been recovered. We have a traitor in our midst."

Oh, no, thought Sophronia. *They are blaming her for my actions.*

Madame Spetuna spat in disgust. "And you pick me because I am a woman? I've hardly left this room. How would I accomplish this miraculous interference?"

"But you *have* left the room a few times, to use the facilities, you claim. I find it interesting that Spice Administrator Bawkin disappeared after we sent him to the record room. As if someone on board had something to hide

that school records might reveal. The only possible person… is you."

Madame Spetuna turned to her lover for aid, but even the head flywayman was looking at her distrustfully now.

"It would be exactly like this place to put their best agent in our midst. And you would have to be one of their best."

Madame Spetuna made no further protestations.

Sophronia realized that she was *trying* to take the blame, so that she, Sophronia, would remain safe. She wished they'd had time to consult, but decided she would honor the woman's wishes. In the end, Madame Spetuna knew more of what was going on than she did. Clearly, this inside intelligencer thought it more important for Sophronia to remain an unknown element and to destroy the center of the Pickleman operation herself. Sophronia put the wicker chicken down, tucked it against the wall with her foot, and slipped back out the door before anyone could see her. Then, fast as she could, she climbed outside to one of the upper portholes so she could see what transpired next.

The Chutney was saying something curt, issuing an order. Then he signaled his two bully boys and a runner to follow and strode from the room. This left Madame Spetuna with the gangly Pickleman, one runner, and five flywaymen. Several of the flywaymen closed in on her.

Madame Spetuna leapt away, managing to evade capture long enough to scoop up the wicker chicken.

With a manic look in her eye, she waited, clutching it to her chest, while the men closed in on her. Sophronia, horrified, realized that the intelligencer intended to sacrifice herself!

The chicken exploded.

Sophronia saw blood splatter everywhere. Top hats and flywayman scarves went flying. Madame Spetuna flew into the air, like a child tossed by an enthusiastic uncle.

And the window through which Sophronia was looking shattered outward into her face.

Sophronia jerked back, so shocked by the blast she let go of her perch and fell off the side of the dirigible.

Instinct had her shooting her hurlie at the side of the ship, grabbing on to the rope. Good thing, too, as she couldn't see anything. There was something in her eyes—she could only hope it was mostly her own blood

and not glass. Thankfully, the hooks of the hurlie found purchase on some protrusion stable enough to support her weight. Then her arms were jerked almost out of their sockets and she crashed into the side of the ship, face-first.

The dark red of pain shredded through her brain, and then, blessedly, a bleak vacant black.

Falling Down on the Job

Sophronia had no idea how long she dangled, but it must have been a very long time.

When she awoke, the arm from which she hung—upon which she wore the hurlie—was entirely numb. Her face hurt like nothing she'd ever experienced before. A tender touch with her working hand suggested her nose was likely broken and much of her skin sliced by glass. She tried not to think about the consequences of scarring. Any future as an *agent provocateur* would definitely be impossible. She was thirsty and hungry, yet stomach-sick from the scene before she fell: Madame Spetuna exploding. All that blood. It was almost as painful as her shoulder out of its socket.

Mademoiselle Geraldine must have taken out the two guns on the squeak decks, or surely they would have seen her. At least Sophronia hadn't become a target while she dangled.

Every part of her hurt—belly, head, face, back, arms—but what could she do? No one was going to rescue her. She had to ignore the pain and get herself to Sister Mattie's classroom to rendezvous with the headmistress and the vampire. And she had to do it by climbing, for she'd given Mademoiselle Geraldine her obstructor. Sophronia and climbing, under normal circumstances, were old chums. But now? The very idea made her want to scream.

When asked afterward, Sophronia never could articulate how she made that nightmare of a climb. Somehow she traversed two-thirds of the ship with eyes partly closed from the hit to her face—thank goodness the glass

hadn’t blinded her—and only one working arm. It made her rethink all previous hardships in her life. *I’ll never complain of cold tea again.*

Eventually, she made it to Sister Mattie’s balcony, collapsing in a heap among the potted plants. She was grateful for the leaves canopied over her, an odd kind of protection. The sky was turning gray beyond them, the sun soon to rise. Never in her life had it taken so long to climb anywhere. She hoped fervently that there was a vampire in residence to carry her to safety, because as she crawled with one arm toward the balcony door, she was convinced she would never walk again.

The door was locked and bolted. She knocked, but no one answered. She fumbled in her pocket for lockpicks, but the world seemed to be turning fuzzy as well as gray. Now her good hand wasn’t working, either. And then she found, to her surprise and embarrassment, that she was lying flat on her stomach, shaking. She wondered, around an odd buzzing in her brain, if she was the first to arrive. Shouldn’t the others have completed their tasks hours ago? Was it possible that they were in worse trouble than she?

And then she wasn’t wondering anything at all. She was sliding down a long soft peaceful tunnel into a numb sleep.

A loud shriek, like an upset teakettle, woke Sophronia. Disorientated, she jerked, only then registering the pain shooting through her body.

Ouch. Wait, is that me *shrieking?*

No, it was coming from her stomach.

All right, not her stomach but the hard warm body tucked up against her ribs.

Bumbersnoot!

Sophronia extracted the screaming mechanimal with her working arm, flopping like a fish because she was lying on his strap. Every movement was agony. She tried to concentrate on which parts hurt most, where the serious damage might be. Her face seemed particularly bad.

I’m sunburned was her first thought. *That’s why my face is throbbing.* The sun was beating down, although the potted plants were doing their best to protect her. They must be floating high enough to be above the clouds. *Oh, no, I’ll get freckles and Lady Linette will be so disappointed.*

Automatically, she fumbled with Bumbersnoot, trying to stop his noise.

Only one working arm? Did I misplace my shoulder? How careless.

Vieve had never shown her how to shut Bumbersnoot's alarm off. Finally, Sophronia resorted to popping open the casing to his miniature boilers and dumping all the steaming water unceremoniously out onto the deck. With a smoky sigh, the mechanimal went silent. His tail tick-tocked ever more slowly until he was perfectly still.

Sophronia collapsed next to him. *I know how you feel.*

One small part of her brain realized that if any enemy was outside within hearing distance, they would come looking for the source of that noise. But she no longer cared. There wasn't any part of her that didn't hurt, including, now, her ears, which were ringing with the aftereffects of Bumbersnoot's alarm.

The Picklemen have activated the valves. Apparently the espionage side of her brain refused to stop functioning. Perhaps it was like Bumbersnoot's tail, the last to stop. *We must be up as high as they need.*

The door to the balcony banged open. Sophronia hadn't enough energy to lift her head. Depression hit her. *What matter if they find me now?*

"Oh, it's only you," said a jocular boy's voice. A shadow fell over her and his tone became high-pitched with concern. "Miss, what on earth happened to you?"

Sophronia groaned, finally remembering the events of the previous night. Fortunately, her jaw seemed to be working. "Exploded wicker chicken. Fell."

Handle's worried face appeared in her blurry field of view. "Was that you, making that squawk?"

"Not exactly. Help me inside, please?" She might have wondered what he was doing there, but her brain was only able to cope with one thing at a time. Right now it was busy remembering.

The sootie tutted and began to drag her inside—by her shoulders.

Sophronia suppressed a scream. It came out as a hoarse moaning cough. For the first time in her life, fainting genuinely appealed.

Handle let go of her.

Sophronia rolled onto her side and began to retch against the cool dirty wood of the deck. She hadn't eaten in a long time, so nothing came out. *Saved from one humiliation.*

“Oh, miss. Himself will never forgive me for this.”

“What could you do?” Sophronia was weighed down with her own guilt. “You were under the whip. I’m sorry I couldn’t come for you first. Had to be stealthy. Best possible plan.”

“’Course you couldn’t, miss. Don’t talk waffle—sooties have been through worse. Now, how to get you in?”

“It’s not at all dignified, but you’d best drag me by my feet.”

Handle did so, and thus managed to get her inside Sister Mattie’s chamber.

Sophronia pulled the partly disassembled Bumbersnoot carcass in her wake. She half expected to find other sooties waiting for her, sitting around in the student chairs wearing bonnets and acting the farce of lessons. *I must be delirious.*

There was only Handle.

“What’s happening?” she whispered around the pain.

Handle attempted to prop her up against a pouf. She was still on the floor, mind you, but he was aiming for a more refined position. Sophronia managed it. Once modestly upright, she noticed a prone body on an improvised couch made of two chairs and a hassock wedged together.

“Who’s that?”

“The headmistress was also hurt pretty bad. Took a bullet to the calf. I brought her in. The vampire’s been sleeping in the potting shed, over there.” Handle gestured to Sister Mattie’s large wardrobe, which had been converted to a potting shed long before Sophronia’s time.

“Oh, dear,” said Sophronia. “I suppose *you* will have to pop my shoulder back in, then.”

“What’s that, miss?”

“It’s out of the socket. We learned about it in a lesson on basic field medicinals and mock injuries. You have to put it back in for me. My nose, too, if possible. I’m pretty enough, but a crooked nose won’t ever be fashionable. That’s assuming none of my face cuts need stitches. If I’m scarring, we won’t bother. Might as well have a crooked nose.”

Handle looked sick as she explained, but he’d have to get over it, if the headmistress wasn’t available.

On the other hand, instructing him made Sophronia feel better. She was injured, but she had a plan.

Mademoiselle Geraldine woke up at that moment. She looked hale enough, except her skirts were hiked up in a manner no gentlewoman ought to hike, and there was a large bandage around one calf.

“Miss Temminnick, what *do* you look like?” was quickly followed by “We gave you up for lost. Now I see we were nearly correct.”

Sophronia was relieved, for Mademoiselle Geraldine could guide poor Handle through the steps of a surgeon’s dance. Fortunately, the headmistress did not flinch away from this duty. Even more fortunately, for Handle’s sake, Sophronia did faint during the shoulder adjustment and stayed fainted for the rest.

She awoke some time later to find her arm braced and bound against her side and her head wrapped. The bandages probably started life as a petticoat and were a bright lavender color with cream lace.

“Ah, good, you’re awake.” Mademoiselle Geraldine was sitting up and drinking…

“Tea?” Sophronia whimpered pathetically. *Oh, glorious thing!*

Handle, that scruffy angel of mercy, immediately handed her a cup. Sophronia sipped in a reverent manner. She didn’t complain that he’d put in a vast amount of sugar. Being a sootie, he rarely got sugar, and he likely thought he was spoiling her.

The headmistress reported in. “We put the shoulder back in and checked the nose, which wasn’t broken, thank goodness, just askew. You’ll have two black eyes, I’m afraid, and us with no raw meat to apply. None of the cuts were deep, so we dressed them with vinegar and one of Mathilde’s best poultices. They should heal fine. So your career is safe. The sootie boy here did very well.”

Handle was grinning, ear to juglike ear. “I never thought I had the healing touch.”

Mademoiselle Geraldine nodded. “Real skill there. You help get us out of this safe and sound, young man, and I’ll set you on a path to study medicine. You see if I don’t.”

Handle glowed with pleasure at the praise and the thought of a soot-free future.

Sophronia sipped her sweet tea and, much to her surprise, began to cry. Well, sob, really.

“Stop that!” ordered the headmistress. “Your bandages will get damp.”

Sophronia wasn't certain if it was relief that her face wasn't worse—she'd never thought herself a particularly vain person—or grief over poor Madame Spetuna. Perhaps it was simply residual emotion from a very trying evening. Or something like joy, at the prospect of one of her sootie friends making himself a good life out of this awful situation. More chance than poor Soap had before the bite.

The thought of Soap seemed to cause her shoulder to ache even worse, which made her cry harder. Which made her hurt more.

"I'm a wreck," she blubbered. "Oh, this is so embarrassing."

Handle sidled over and handed her a smudged handkerchief, his face scrunched in sympathy.

Sophronia controlled her emotions by turning on her observational eye. She noticed that Mademoiselle Geraldine had returned the obstructor. Handle had strapped it onto Sophronia's good wrist. He'd moved the hurlie to that side as well, so both devices were on the same arm. Her sleeve had to be rolled up to compensate. It made her feel lopsided and unfashionable. Then again, what did she care for an exposed wrist? She was bloodied and bound and dressed as a boy anyway.

"What happened?" demanded Mademoiselle Geraldine.

Sophronia told her everything. Including Madame Spetuna's voluntary spectacular demise. "Why would she do that? I might have been able to rescue her. Instead, I handed her a deadly wicker chicken." She felt the sickening broiling acid of guilt, familiar since Professor Braithwope's fall.

Handle gave her a soft bread roll.

Sophronia gummed it gratefully, eating slowly, in tiny bites, sipping the tea in between. It settled her tummy.

Mademoiselle Geraldine looked infinitely sad. "She was a fine intelligencer and a good friend, but she knew the risks. And she knew her duty. You can't fault her for doing something you would have done in her place. She would have taken as many key agents with her as possible. And it's likely she saw no possible extraction for herself. Death and glory rather than torture and ignominy. Much alike, you and she. You know, *wicker chicken* would be a good code name. Suitably innocuous and an ode to her."

"You can't rescue them all, miss," added Handle.

Sophronia recovered enough to say, "Speaking of which, how did *you* get here, Handle?"

The sootie looked to the headmistress.

Mademoiselle Geraldine explained that Professor Braithwope had ejected two Picklemen out of the pilot's bubble. Then she had taken a bullet to the leg during their squeak deck liberation. All four were now gone, thrown overboard with guns and ill intentions in tow.

Professor Braithwope had brought the injured headmistress to the rendezvous point and then left to find food, driven to hunger by her bleeding leg. He'd returned with Handle, whom he'd managed to rescue during a chaotic moment in the boiler room and fuzzily determined was necessary to their cause, although he mistakenly identified him as Lady Linette's stuffed badger. Professor Braithwope safely asleep, Handle had fetched tea. They'd stayed holed up all day, waiting for Sophronia. Also, they needed the vampire's help to do anything further.

Handle reported that the sooties were fine and in reasonably good spirits, having seen him rescued by the vampire. "None of us have much interaction with old fangs, but if we have anyone on our side, we're grateful it's him. After that first attack, we all assumed he'd been killed."

"Handle," ordered Mademoiselle Geraldine, "give Sophronia my grenadines. Keep some for yourself, of course, but I won't be going anywhere soon and she's got working legs and one good arm."

Sophronia took a fortifying breath. The tea and food were helping, and Mademoiselle Geraldine was correct. There was work to do as soon as the sun set. Those attack mechanimals hadn't yet been used. The Picklemen weren't done. She had to gather her strength. She couldn't stop now.

Handle handed over a stuffed reticule. Inside it were several of Mademoiselle Geraldine's infamous fake pastries.

"What, what?" stuttered Sophronia, sounding not unlike Professor Braithwope.

"Small explosives," replied the headmistress. "All of them. I used up several last night. These are the last. Handle has a few. He'll show you how they deploy."

"I don't know about explosives, Headmistress. I haven't had much luck with them, so far." Sophronia was skeptical.

"Nonsense, young lady. You'll do as you are instructed. Use these pastries as needed and do not be scared or ashamed of the necessity."

"Yes, Headmistress."

Handle showed her how they were activated, by depressing the decorative element on the top, be it cherry or icing twirl. Simple devices, in the end. *And I always thought them merely beautiful representations of a very odd hobby. I should have known they were deadly as well as decorative. Everything at this school is both.* It was practically the school's unofficial motto. The official one being *Ut acerbus terminus*: To the bitter end. Madame Spetuna had taken that motto to heart.

"Tell me truthfully, Handle, how are the sooties, really?"

"Not bad, miss. We all know how to turn and shield the delicate bits. And, frankly, the whip-hand is not so good as he thinks he is."

Sophronia searched his face, hoping he wasn't making light of a bad situation.

Handle continued. "They need us to keep this boat afloat, so they feed us well enough. Won't lie, it hasn't been easy. We're running her faster and harder than ever, *and* with a skeleton crew. Plus, we didn't take on stores beforehand. They are pushing her. And us. But there are mechanicals to help with the heavy lifting—good ones, complex protocols."

"Tonight," promised Sophronia rashly. "I'll get them all out tonight."

"Even Smokey Bones?"

"Of course."

"Who is *Smokey Bones*?" demanded Mademoiselle Geraldine.

"Our cat, my lady." Handle poured more tea.

Mademoiselle Geraldine didn't seem to know what to say to that.

Sophronia took another deep breath. "I can only think of one option at this point. We are too close to London. We have to crash the school and use the soldier mechanicals to do it."

Handle and Mademoiselle Geraldine both gaped.

The headmistress breathed out, "No!"

Sophronia explained. "The Picklemen have already used this airship to activate their updated mechanicals. That screaming noise you heard was my alarm to that effect. They needed our pilot's bubble, and they needed to be high enough to send the signal through the aether. You ask me, they took out every major key-point mechanical within aetheric transmission distance. Staff mechanicals would have gone bonkers, too, but were mainly side consequence. Now they only need to pacify the capital, and the whole country is theirs. I think they intend to drop down and offload the attack

mechanimals from our hold into the city streets. If I were them, I'd do it after dark, right when people start to feel safe from further attack from the domestic mechanicals."

"Attack?" gasped Mademoiselle Geraldine.

"Or whatever the first part of the plan caused to happen. Domestics weren't the target. They're collateral. Infrastructure mechanicals were the target—train switches, station houses, government clangerclerks, record-room processing centers—that kind of thing. I overheard the Chutney himself before the chicken went off. It's almost sunset, and I wager we're sinking." Words piled up, one upon the other, as if through the act of talking Sophronia was understanding it all. If she didn't hurt so much, she would have paced the room.

Mademoiselle Geraldine and Handle were a gratifyingly riveted audience.

Sophronia continued, "Two stages of chaos—both requiring *this* airship to execute. No wonder they wanted the school so badly. They can't be allowed to complete their plan. They simply can't. There's only one way to stop them, and that is to crash with their mechanimal army still on board. Preferably destroying the belly of the airship. The trouble is, how to do this without killing everyone else?"

Mademoiselle Geraldine was thoughtful. "I knew that pilot's bubble would be a problem. Such advanced technology was always going to tempt thieves. Professor Lefoux often gets ahead of herself. And poor Professor Braithwope—what's left of his tether is to *this* ship." She added, "You'll have to aim the soldier mechanicals carefully or *everything* will explode."

Sophronia nodded. "Tell me how."

The rest of sunset was spent drinking tea and strategizing on how one young woman could sabotage an entire dirigible.

Handle, who had a sootie's affection for his ship, didn't like the idea one jot.

Sophronia tried to make her case. "The Chutney is on board, alive, and in an unknown location. He has two men with him. There is also his right-hand man, a record keeper with dyed black hair, and some of the five flywaymen who may have survived the wicker chicken incident. And there are two runners still at large."

"One runner," corrected Mademoiselle Geraldine. "Professor

Braithwope got peckish during our peregrinations."

"He got one of the supervisors in the boiler room as well." Handle looked rather sick at the memory. He'd probably never witnessed a necking before.

Sophronia wondered at the ethics of utilizing the primitive feeding instincts of an insane vampire in their cause. *Is it justified? Are we harming Professor Braithwope further by allowing him to run amok or is this simply the way he is now?*

"So that's two still in engineering and one in the propeller room?" Sophronia crossed the appropriate dots off her map. "Approximately seven Picklemen and five flywaymen left. Some of them injured. I could maybe eliminate them in the space of a night—if I weren't injured myself. But as things stand, I'm sorry. It's better to destroy the ship."

Mademoiselle Geraldine and Handle, odd allies, exchanged apprehensive looks.

"So long as you do it carefully. Let's go over the plan again." Mademoiselle Geraldine's agreement was reluctant.

The sun set.

Professor Braithwope awoke and instantly tried to eat both ladies. They smelled of blood and weakness—Sophronia supposed he couldn't be faulted. Poor Handle had no alternative but to give over his own wrist to quiet the beast. Fortunately, Professor Braithwope was in an amiable mood and retracted his fangs after only a snack. He had eaten his fill the night before.

This left Handle disgusted, upset, and weak from loss of blood.

"Stupid vampire!" shouted the sootie, wrapping his own wrist in bandages this time.

"Sorry, little man," apologized Professor Braithwope. "You do have a pleasant char flavor to your skin, whot, with the added spice of smoke. Reminds me of the good old days of toast. I miss toast."

Handle sniffed at him. "Go find yourself a Pickleman next time."

"Pickled? I don't think I should like that. Fresh is best, even toasted."

"Never you mind," interrupted Mademoiselle Geraldine when Handle

looked like he intended to argue further. “Our apologies, Handle. You did not sign up for mealtimes.”

“No, I did not!” agreed the aggrieved Handle.

“Think of it as valuable experience for your prospective switch in professions.”

Handle was thoughtful. “Bloodletting?”

“Exactly.”

He was somewhat mollified.

Sophronia stood and tried to stretch. She ought to feel better after resting covered in Sister Mattie’s poultices, but every part of her still ached. Now all the little muscles, strained from hanging and climbing and falling, also hurt. She hobbled like an old lady.

“I’m going to check the lay of the land.” She headed onto the balcony.

They were flying quite low now, rooftops clearly visible although the moon was not yet up. *At least with the moon no longer full, some werewolves are available this evening if Agatha manages to get ahold of them.*

Ahead twinkled a vast number of lights. *London.*

Sophronia suppressed a shiver of apprehension. *Tonight I crash an airship. On purpose.*

She squinted into the lights. *Was that…?* Yes, a small dirigible was approaching them at speed, under cover of darkness, flying stealthily, a dark shape against the twinkling background.

Somehow, Sophronia knew that this was her friends. There was something about the way the ship weaved through the air—intent, stylish, almost a waltz. It stank of Geraldine’s training.

Sophronia unhitched the miniature crossbow from her belt. She took one of the valuable targeting bolts and created a satchel for it by weaving it through the lace edge of her red doily. Into this she stuffed a hastily scribbled note, torn off the corner of her map.

“Meet at soapy entrance. Bring this bolt back.”

Only her particular friends would know what that meant. Even if she was entirely wrong and that ship was full of enemy reinforcements, nothing bad would come of her message.

The crossbow was so small she only needed one hand to fire. But still, everything took twice as long as it ought. She’d have to remember that in

her calculations. She took careful aim and fired the bolt at the side of the gondola section of the approaching dirigible, now clearly visible.

There was a distant shout, and then a pause, and then the ship dropped down and altered its approach. *Success!*

Sophronia limped back inside. “Change of plans! Handle, you are with me. We take out the propeller room and free the sooties there first. Headmistress, if you and the good professor would meet us outside engineering? He’ll help you get there.”

“What good could I possibly do?” protested Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“I believe we have a rescue incoming. If all works out as I hope, they will be meeting us just outside the boiler room hull.”

“Capital. How did you manage that, my dear girl?”

“I have capable friends,” replied Sophronia.

Handle said, “That our tea cake angel?”

“Dimity? Yes, I believe so. Or someone sent by her.”

“Good.” Handle went all cheerful. “She’s prime at pinching a tasty pastry.”

“Not quite certain how that skill set has any bearing on this situation,” objected Mademoiselle Geraldine.

“And yet how do we know it doesn’t?” reasoned Sophronia.

Handle only tossed one of the explosive fake pastries up into the air suggestively.

There was no one in the hallway outside their room. In all probability, the Picklemen were occupied with their invasion, in the storage room readying their attack mechanimals.

With no time to waste, Sophronia saw Mademoiselle Geraldine off, carried by a docile vampire in the direction of engineering. She and Handle headed toward the rear as fast as she could hobble.

Eerie and empty as the school had been before, it was more so now. All the mechanicals were gone, their tracks abandoned. Her obstructor remained unused. It was a worry, but also a relief, for it allowed them to move quickly. With the excitement of the hunt back on, Sophronia’s aches faded somewhat to the background. Or perhaps Sister Mattie’s poultices were finally taking effect.

They found the propeller room, which was much smaller than engineering, manned by six sooties with one Pickleman supervisor. The

man in question sported a nasty expression and held a crop, rather than a whip, and a smallish gun.

Sophronia's good arm was sound. Handle was enough of a boy to have hurled stones at random things in order to break them—as boys do. So when two fake pastries went flying, the world around that Pickleman exploded.

He collapsed, unconscious.

The sooties cheered, weakly but with real joy.

Sophronia trussed the Pickleman up with a strip of her shirt—she was running out of hair ribbons and curtain cords—and nabbed his gun. She gave his crop to a sootie with an equally nasty expression. He seemed delighted.

Handle explained the situation to his compatriots. They instantly shut down all boiler activity. Propeller work didn't keep the ship afloat, just headed it in the right direction, but this would stall the approach to London. The great whump-whump vibrations of the propeller slowed. It would take a while for the heat to work out completely, but it was a start.

The group of eight then dashed back through the ship, avoiding the area around the hold.

Mademoiselle Geraldine and Professor Braithwope were waiting for them, thank goodness. Near them was a limp body—the final runner. There were puncture wounds on his neck, and Professor Braithwope looked like a man who had overindulged in the cook's claret. He sat motionless on the hallway carpet, slumped back against one wall, hand over his belly.

"Is he dead?" Sophronia asked Mademoiselle Geraldine, who was hopping about on one leg, looking annoyed.

The headmistress made a disgusted nose. "No, gone to the cats."

"Not Professor Braithwope. The runner."

"Oh, him? Not yet." Even though it was said in an offhand manner, the headmistress sounded dangerous.

The sooties gave both Mademoiselle Geraldine and the vampire a wide berth.

That's two more off my list. Sophronia mentally crossed them off her map.

Professor Braithwope let out a belch. He was useless for the moment.

Sophronia gave Handle the gun. He passed it off to a tall muscled boy

who looked like he'd grown up in dark places where guns were common. She and Handle armed themselves with exploding pastries. The other sooties were ready to grab whatever tools they could once in the room.

"Ready to reclaim your territory, troops?" Sophronia asked.

They nodded, grim-faced, eager.

The two Picklemen in the main boiler room were taken entirely by surprise by a coordinated attack from above. With one charge, Handle and the four unarmed sooties eliminated the supervisor on the platform overlooking the activity below. He tumbled over the edge with a shout, landing with a sickening crunch and sizzle on top of the biggest boiler.

Meanwhile, Sophronia and the sootie with the gun ran to the edge of the platform, knelt, and took aim. He fired and she threw. The man below was concentrating on his whip, fearing rebellion from within. Either fake food or bullet must have hit, because he folded into a heap. The sooties around him seized the moment, removing both his gun and his whip and administering a few well-earned kicks.

Just like that, the night was theirs and the remaining sooties were free. Sophronia's tiny invading army climbed down the stairs to greet them.

Sophronia assisted Mademoiselle Geraldine with her uninjured shoulder. By the time they arrived, Handle had all the sooties abreast of the situation and bustling about shutting down the boilers.

Mademoiselle Geraldine looked over the dirty triumphant group in awe. "These boys are quite wonderful, aren't they?"

"I've always thought so." Sophronia kept the annoyance out of her voice.

Handle explained. "As the boilers cool, she'll eventually sink to the ground. But it'll take days. The balloons are filled up tight, and very little helium escapes. You'll need to outgas to really get her down. I'll stay with you, miss, show you how."

Sophronia shook her head. "No, Handle, you've done enough. Professor Braithwope and I can take it from here."

Handle was not convinced. The vampire was still sagged in the hallway above in a drunken stupor. But it took a stronger man than Handle to disobey Sophronia. It took Soap.

"If you say so, miss." He turned to his fellows. "Let's find Smokey Bones, boys, and abandon ship."

A brief flurry of activity ensued while they looked for their cat, who, of course, when desperately wanted, had vanished entirely. Finally, they unearthed it beneath a particulate illuminator and picked the creature up, yowling.

Sophronia hid a smile. “Come on, everyone. Over behind that coal pile in the corner. We should have a rescue waiting at that hatch I’m so fond of.”

Handle popped open said hatch and there, nested up alongside the school in a display of real air ability, was the gondola of a second, smaller airship. Its balloon was crowded in alongside their own dirigible, somehow neither tangled in rigging nor popped by a balcony. *Very impressive piloting.*

Sophronia stuck her head out the hatch, her last piece of fake food at the ready, just in case. “My, but that’s some pretty floating.”

“Thank you. I’ve been in training these seven months,” said a sharp cool voice in response. “Never thought it’d be for you, but we can’t always pick our battles.”

There, standing before her, looking well dressed and as stunning as ever, was Monique de Pelouse.

Out of the Flywaymen into the Fire

I got your note.” Monique was almost smiling.

“Or rather, we got your note.” Dimity appeared from behind the taller girl with a mercurial grin. She was wiggling Sophronia’s doily-wrapped crossbow bolt gaily in one hand.

“As requested, we kept the bolt for you.” Agatha ducked into view from the other side of the baffle.

“What *are* you all doing here?” Sophronia could hardly believe it.

“Agatha and I utilized Soap,” explained Dimity. “Last night. You know, as a”—she struggled for delicacy under the circumstances—“lupine mount. Werewolves are really quite fast, and he was in enough control of himself not to eat us, as it wasn’t full moon anymore. That said, I shouldn’t recommended it as a long-distance mode of transport, not for three people.”

“Three! Is Vieve with you?”

“Nope.”

“Can’t be Pillover.”

“Never that rusty-gutted whiffin.” Dimity was not about to give her brother any quarter.

“Who, then?”

“Felix Mersey.”

Sophronia couldn’t stop asking questions. This was all so amazing. “Felix?” She shook her head, which was a bad idea as it made her nose hurt.

Monique interrupted what looked to be a long inquisition. “Someone had to man the boiler on this airship, after all.” Of course Soap would have

been a better choice, but he could no longer float.

"You're using a peer of the realm for *manual labor*?"

"You can think of a better use?" Monique was getting quite vampiric in her old age.

"You trust him not to sabotage your ship?" Sophronia stared at Monique and Dimity. Both should know better, for different reasons, but still!

"Yes, with good reason, but never mind that now." Monique was impatient.

Dimity craned her head back and squinted up. "Sophronia, you look awful. What have you done to your face? Is that paint? Are you in disguise? And look at your slippers! They're filthy."

"Fell. No. No. And sorry about the slippers." Sophronia was grateful she wasn't actively bleeding anymore. The last thing they needed was Dimity fainting.

Agatha continued the assessment. "And your arm, did you break your arm?"

"Dislocated shoulder."

"Could we get on?" snapped Monique. "I can't hold this thing here forever."

It was then that Sophronia realized *Monique* was at the helm of the dirigible. It was one of the little ones with only two decks—one open on top under the balloon and the other below, housing the boilers. Rather startlingly, the airship appeared to actually belong to her.

"How many can you hold?" Sophronia accepted this fact reluctantly and moved on.

"How many do you have?" The blonde was as annoying as ever, even as she made expert adjustments to the balloon's height and propeller speed, to keep pace with the school.

"Two dozen sooties and one headmistress."

"Twenty-six." Monique calculated out loud.

"Twenty-five," Sophronia corrected. "I'm staying here."

"What? Why?" objected Dimity.

"I must crash the school."

"No!" Dimity and Agatha gasped in shock.

"Has to be done—trust me. Monique? Can I start loading?"

"Yes, yes." Monique was dismissive. "I'll adjust the air ballasts. We

should be fine. Sooties aren't heavy."

Agatha ran to the opposite edge of the gondola to help stabilize.

Sophronia realized, without too much surprise, that Dimity and Agatha were acting as Monique's crew. With Felix Mersey down below. The dirigible must belong to the Westminster Hive.

"Handle, you first," Sophronia said.

"Right you are, miss." Handle slithered out the hatch and down the rope ladder. Smokey Bones was a fluff of disgruntlement, riding his shoulder like a small angry figurehead.

"Is that a cat?" wondered Monique. "Oh, *really*." But despite this verbal disgust, she looked on her furry passenger with unexpected affection. Sophronia would never have supposed Monique a cat lover, but when Handle marched over to get instructions, she made chirrup noises and scratched Smokey Bones under the chin. The cat narrowed yellow eyes but showed good sense and did not swipe at her.

The other sooties followed. A few collapsed against the gondola baffle. Most automatically headed below. It might be a smaller boiler room, but it was still a boiler room and they could make themselves useful.

Unfortunately, that meant Felix Mersey came up. He looked the same, perhaps more smudged than normal. Something was missing. Oh, yes, his waistcoat was plain with no gears sewn on. He lacked a brass ribbon about his top hat. In fact, he—shockingly—wore no hat at all. Fortunately for the state of the universe, he still wore a bit of kohl around his eyes.

"Ria, you're hurt." He looked up at her.

"Yes, but it's not important. Dimity, is that everyone?"

"Only me left." Mademoiselle Geraldine clasped Sophronia's good hand as a man might shake his fellow's after a night of carousing. "You are convinced that this is the only way?"

Sophronia was resolved. "I am."

The headmistress handed over her ring of keys, gripping one small gold one. "This is the key you want. Open the box and toggle the switch." She swung herself around and began laboriously to hop, one rung at a time, down the swaying ladder. She stopped with her head still in the hold. "Miss Temminnick?"

"Yes?"

"Congratulations. I pronounce you properly finished. Try to survive the

next few hours."

"Yes, Headmistress. Thank you, Headmistress."

Felix and Dimity helped Mademoiselle Geraldine down the rest of the way.

"Now you, Ria." Felix's beautiful face was turned up to her. She had a tiny pang over what might have been. Such a pity about that whole betrayal thing. *Too pretty. Too late.*

Before Sophronia could disabuse him, Dimity climbed up the ladder.

Sophronia let her get all the way to the top.

"If you're staying, I'm staying," insisted the best of all possible friends.

"No." Sophronia smiled despite the fact that it hurt.

"I'm trained, too, remember? You don't need to protect me."

"I know that. Look at you! Allied with Monique, come to my rescue. Of course you don't require protection. That's not it. I have something important, and I can only entrust it to you."

Sophronia unbuttoned her man's shirt, ignoring the gasps, and dug about in her cleavage, eventually producing her roll of torn notes from the Pickleman's book. "Here. These are in code, but I'm convinced someone we know can crack it. I believe they are very important. They probably expose the whole of the Pickleman plot, or at least the worst bits."

Dimity still hesitated.

"Take them." Sophronia pressed them on her friend. "Make copies. Deliver them to anyone you think might listen. Take them to the popular press if need be. Try that new head of the Bureau of Unnatural Registry, Sidheag's relation. I know she hates him, but he seems pretty upstanding—for a werewolf. I take it the dewan didn't believe you when you asked for aid and Lord Akeldama wouldn't interfere. So you went to the hive, and that's why it's Monique to the rescue?"

Dimity took the notes. "Couldn't Agatha…?"

"No. Agatha works for Lord Akeldama, and Lord Akeldama likes to collect information, not share it. Monique works for the hive. The sooties don't have any useful contacts. You're the only one I trust. You have to stay safe. If I fail, you're the only hope to get the truth out. Now, quickly, please tell me what happened with the mechanicals."

"You know they were activated?"

"Bumbersnoot told me."

“Domestics everywhere went crazy. Started tearing apart their houses. Not the walls and furniture, but anything steam powered or automated. Often each other. It was bizarre. People were terrified. Oh! And all the major mechanicals failed. Trains aren’t running. Ports are shut down. No one but us is floating. It’s chaos down there. Rumor is someone was killed. By a mechanical.”

Sophronia nibbled her bottom lip. “I figured it was something like. They’ve got a hold full of large angry mechanimals up here to finish the job.”

Dimity’s face went still. “Objective?”

“Probably toppling the government. It’s too much effort for anything less. How many steps removed do you think Felix’s father is from the throne of England?”

Dimity blanched. “He’s a duke… not enough.” She tucked the notes down her own cleavage, then rearranged her lace tuck to disguise the bulge. “I understand fully.”

And Sophronia knew, without having to explain further, that Dimity did, indeed, understand fully.

Face drawn and pale, her friend climbed back down.

“Will you come on?” yelled Monique.

“Dimity!” Sophronia shouted after her. “How’s Soap?”

Dimity smiled. “Bony boy. Tough transport, but he’s fine.”

“Catch.” Laboriously, Sophronia unhooked Bumbersnoot from where he dangled over her bad arm and tossed him down. She felt instantly lonely. It was as if he’d been hanging there most of her life—although it had only been three days.

Dimity caught him.

“I had to disassemble him a bit. Vieve can fix him. If I don’t make it, give him to Soap.”

Dimity’s big hazel eyes went wide at the very idea, but she nodded mutely. She looked like she wanted to cry but didn’t.

Monique and Agatha were engaged in a protracted conversation over the helm.

Next, Felix Mersey tried to climb up the ladder to Sophronia. She felt like an odd kind of Juliet, cursed with an overabundance of Romeos.

“I’m coming with you.” His tone was dramatically romantic.

“No, you most certainly are not.” Sophronia brandished her last piece of exploding fake food at him threateningly.

“But you’re badly hurt. You need help.”

“Not your help. You cannot be trusted.”

Obstinately, he continued to climb.

“Dimity, a little assistance, if you would be so kind?” Sophronia summoned reinforcements.

Dimity reached up and grabbed Felix by the foot with both hands, twisting it sharply.

“Ow!” the boy objected. “What’d you do that for?”

“Get down here this minute, young man.” Dimity sounded remarkably like Sophronia’s mother in a temper. A glimpse into Dimity’s future, should she find that nice innocuous parliamentarian and settle down.

Felix looked like he might try to continue up, although Dimity’s grip had to hurt.

Sophronia decide the food didn’t appear threatening enough. She put it away and whipped out her bladed fan. She’d lost the leather guard at some point. It looked quite deadly.

Felix climbed back down. “You’re a hardhearted female.”

“What are you even doing here?” Sophronia did not hide her exasperation.

He gave a little involuntary glance at Monique. There seemed to be some kind of arrangement between them. An odd and horrible thought occurred to Sophronia. Could he, all along, have been Westminster Hive’s inside agent at Bunson’s and within the Picklemen? Was his loyalty to his father faked? Rich, titled, beautiful—if he survived, he’d make for a good vampire. He had everything he wanted in life except immortality. And if he’d kept this hidden from her all along, he was also a very good actor.

Monique passed the helm over to Agatha, picked up and strapped to her back a large carpetbag, and then started to climb the ladder.

Sophronia was getting tired of arguing. And, of all people, she’d be happiest with Monique. Never would she admit it out loud, but at least she knew Monique’s motives and in what ways she couldn’t be trusted. And, quite frankly, if they went down with the ship, she wouldn’t feel guilty on Monique’s behalf.

“Very well,” Sophronia said.

The beautiful blonde hoisted herself nimbly in through the hatch, tugging up the rope ladder behind her.

“You think Agatha can handle your precious ship without you?”

“No, but she’ll get the thing down in one piece, and that’s all that matters. You look awful, Miss Temminnick.”

“Thank you, Miss Pelouse.” *Ah, familiar ground.*

“*Two* black eyes? You always were an overachiever.”

Sophronia grinned and then stopped. It hurt too much. “It’s a gift.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

Sophronia grunted. “Activate the soldier mechanicals and fire on the ship.”

“Not a very complicated plan. How about we turn on all the gas in the hallways as we go up? More explosive that way.”

“I like the way you think,” said Sophronia before she realized what she’d said.

“I always hated this school.” Monique wrinkled her perfect little nose. “Spent a lot of time imagining ways to destroy it.”

“Now I see why you wanted to come aboard.”

“Pure joy of it,” finished the blonde with a sneer. “Let’s get to it, then.”

“What’s in the carpetbag?”

“Options.” Monique was annoyingly mysterious.

Sophronia didn’t know what to think about that. Was Monique to be trusted? Probably not. But some things must be taken on faith. She probably did want to destroy the airship. Monique was simply a hard guardian angel to swallow.

The two girls made their way swiftly through the halls of the dirigible. They worked unfortunately well together—settling into a pattern. Sophronia would take one knee, and Monique, who was taller and uninjured, would stand on Sophronia’s bent leg with a hand to her head for balance, knocking out the gas valves and fixtures in the hallways with a closed fan. They got good at it, like some weird acrobatic dance. They left behind them the redolent smell of gas and the fallen remains of knifelike chandeliers and parasol-shaped light covers. Dangerous indeed.

Professor Braithwope was nowhere to be found. They had no time to figure out where he had gone. Sophronia was, as a result, unexpectedly grateful for Monique's company, even though the older girl rarely said more than two words in a row. At least Sophronia had someone with her at the end.

She tried once to start up a conversation. "How long has Felix Mersey been working for your hive?"

"Long enough."

"Did you recruit him?"

Monique became all enigmatic, but she didn't outright deny it. That was confirmation enough.

"What are you after, Monique? What have you been instructed to collect?" The carpetbag wasn't empty, but it was suspiciously floppy. Even so, Sophronia was careful not to let the girl out of her sight, and, because she was no fool, not to let Monique get within fifty paces of the record room. Perhaps it was her imagination, but Sophronia was certain that frustrated the blonde.

Together they attained the forward squeak deck. Sophronia ran to the small brass box affixed to a railing on one side. She opened it with the gold key from Mademoiselle Geraldine, reached inside, and toggled the switch exactly as the headmistress had instructed.

A loud bell began clanging—a bell with hundreds of sister bells throughout the airship. Now, if the Picklemen knew anything about the workings of the ship, they would know Sophronia's location. This squeak deck was the only place that particular alarm could be activated.

Sophronia turned to watch. The soldier mechanicals were stored in the rear upper deck, but she'd never seen them emerge before. Tracks telescoped out from the side of that deck. The soldiers made their way not through the ship, as she had always thought they would, but out onto the rear squeak deck and onto these bridges as if into nothingness, the tracks forming under the first mechanical's wheels as it moved. They rolled across the middle squeak deck and then over a second set of telescoping tracks that arched in over the railings and split into the multiple tracks inset in the wood under Sophronia's feet.

At each stage, a set of mechanicals stayed behind, so that the tops of all three decks were ringed with soldiers by the end.

In a synchronized movement, the mechanicals all settled back onto their rear wheels, locking down to each deck with a clunk. Hatches opened in the chest area of their carapaces, the whole upper torso sliding back. Each ejected the barrel of a small cannon. Then, in one smooth motion, they all swiveled and pointed their little cannons at… her.

Sophronia had been expecting it. After all, she held the tiny crossbow, and the bolts to go with it, but it was still unnerving.

Monique stared at her with mouth open.

“Never witnessed this, did you?”

“I was always inside as ordered. I knew the school had protections in place, but these are remarkable.”

Sophronia took a deep breath. “Here we go.” She slipped out of her arm sling. Her shoulder screamed in protest, but she did have some dexterity and mobility on that side. She would need both hands from here on out. Besides, her shoulder could always be fixed later, if there was a later. She pointed the small crossbow at the back balloon. *Do three bolts mean that each mechanical has three cannonballs? Or that only one-third of the mechanicals fire at a time?* Either way, she had to aim carefully.

Sophronia fired. The bolt whistled and thunked. A half dozen cannonballs all shot out at the same time. *Right, that’s one-third for each bolt, two shooting from each deck.* Still, even with only a few shooting, Sophronia and Monique were surrounded by smoke and the smell of powder. The noise was deafening. If that didn’t get the remaining Picklemen’s attention, nothing would.

The six balls tore through the back balloon of the airship, leaving it in tatters, outgassing both its air and its helium. That end began to sag downward, the school now dangling from only the two front balloons. There was no explosion, but there were hot-air compartments, and the fueling mechanisms for these fell to the deck and caught fire. Not a very big fire, but it was a start.

Now Sophronia knew why the soldier mechanicals clamped down, because the deck on which she stood was tilting. She and Monique slid toward the rear side until they each came to rest behind one of the soldier mechanicals.

The deck wasn’t overly steep. They could still brace themselves and stand.

“Now what?” wondered Monique.

Sophronia pointed her second bolt at the inside lowest visible part of the back section. It wasn’t an easy shot. The bolt had to fly between rigging, but it hit where she hoped, about a third of the way down the gondola of the school proper.

As one, the soldiers swiveled, cannons pointing downward. Six of them fired again.

They obviously had no protocols against self-destruction. The two on the rear deck fired at their own feet. It was a good thing the airship was tilted, or the one on the far side of the deck from Sophronia might have hit her. As it was, the ball zipped directly over her head. Monique watched in delighted awe as the wood of the back section splintered while catch lines and belay ropes flapped free. The flames licked higher, provided with scraps of aged, lightweight, oiled wood to consume.

Because Sophronia wanted to keep Monique away from the record room, they hadn’t liberated the hallway gases in that section, so this was nothing more than basic destruction. But as the gondola there crumbled—shedding weight as mechanisms, furniture, rigging, and other items fell—the whole ship began to bob about.

“Look.” Monique pointed up. “Shearing wind.”

The ship was no longer floating safely within a breeze. Instead, the surviving balloons had caught in one wind, while the broken section and gondola were in another. Under normal circumstances, there were mechanisms, balance devices, ballast, and sooties to keep this from happening. Now these were failing or gone. As a result, the surviving balloons were caving in on one side and the whole ship was beginning to spin.

“Stop where you are!” The Chutney, his two bully boys, and the Pickleman recorder from the dining hall appeared on the squeak deck. All of them had guns, and all of them were pointed at Monique and Sophronia.

Now that Sophronia was facing him and not looking down from above, there was something awfully familiar about that dark-haired gangly recorder. What was under that trimmed beard and mustache?

Sophronia was pleased to see there were no flywaymen with them. Either they were needed elsewhere or they had given up this lark after the exploding wicker chicken and abandoned the cause.

The recorder with his too-black hair looked hard at Sophronia. His posture changed. He seemed to get taller. Sophronia shook her head, staring at him. His hair had been longer and silver last time she saw him. Also, he'd been clean-shaven and in a very nice suit.

"Miss Temminnick, I should have known," said the Grand Gherkin, otherwise known as Duke Golborne.

"Why, Duke Golborne, I only recently spoke with your son."

"Little traitor. What about him?"

"Oh, nothing, I'm certain he sends his regards."

"Have you been on board all along?"

Sophronia tilted her head at him in acknowledgment.

"Those disappearances. The sabotage!" He glared at his companion. "I told you our little flywayman infiltrator didn't have enough time. And for an intelligencer of that caliber to take herself out of the game like that, she'd have to have been protecting someone. That someone is Miss Temminnick here. I don't know the blonde."

Monique looked upset at that but wasn't suckered into revealing anything. She stood, having produced a little gun from somewhere. She was holding it with a remarkably steady hand, pointed at the Picklemen.

Sophronia felt introductions were in order. "Miss Pelouse, may I present the Duke of Golborne, also known as the Grand Gherkin, and—I believe—this is the Chutney. Forgive me, sir, I do not know your real name. Gentlemen, Monique de Pelouse, Westminster Hive."

Monique gave her a sideways glance that suggested she felt Sophronia needn't have included her affiliation, but she didn't comment. She swiveled a bit to make certain she had the Chutney covered.

Does everyone always have a gun but me? wondered Sophronia. Lacking any other projectile, she hoisted the crossbow, already loaded with the final bolt, and pointed it at the duke. She palmed her last exploding fake pastry in her injured hand.

The duke was not impressed. "I am not a vampire, Miss Temminnick, to be threatened by a flying wooden stick."

Sophronia didn't say anything.

Behind the Picklemen, one-third of the dirigible continued to fall apart rather spectacularly, and something exploded. Then a few more somethings.

"Propeller boilers?" Sophronia suggested this conversationally to

Monique.

Monique inclined her head. “Most likely.”

“There’s no way out of this, ladies.” Duke Golborne was forcing himself to be casual, but he wasn’t as good as Geraldine’s girls. “You are outgunned and outmanned.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Gherkin, we aren’t *manned* at all.” Although Sophronia had thought there would only be three facing them. A slight miscalculation. Still, there was no time like the present.

“Now!” She dropped to the deck.

Monique was a split second behind her.

The Picklemen fired at where they *had* been standing, but Monique was already shooting from a prone position, and Sophronia was throwing food.

Before the Picklemen could reload, the fake pastry—a delectable-looking strawberry shortbread—exploded at their feet. The duke cried out in pain, falling over. One of the bully boys lay facedown, not moving.

The Chutney stumbled back. Monique had shot him in the upper right shoulder. A bloom of wetness appeared on his immaculate black coat.

Before the Picklemen could regroup, Sophronia shot at their side of the deck with her crossbow.

What happened next was so fast and yet, at the time, it felt like everything moved through pudding.

The Chutney had some inkling of what that bolt meant, for he grabbed the duke and slid with him down the deck to where Sophronia and Monique crouched. The surviving bully boy followed.

The soldier mechanicals directed their cannons and fired.

Meanwhile, the three Picklemen engaged the two young ladies in fisticuffs. Monique was fighting the Chutney with teeth, nails, and elbows, like a vicious caged cat. He didn’t seem to know quite what to do with her and certainly couldn’t get a grip.

Sophronia struck out at the duke and the remaining bully boy with her fan. She dropped the now useless crossbow to the deck. It slid out under the railing and over the edge. While the duke was no fighter, the bully boy was good. He came in on her injured side and managed to wrap both his arms around her in a bear hug from behind. He began squeezing as tight as he could.

Sophronia couldn’t get in a decent slice with her fan with her arms

locked against her waist. The pressure against her shoulder was agony. Nevertheless, she kicked and struggled.

Then the upper portion of the deck exploded, wood showering down on them.

Sophronia was shielded by the man holding her. He took the brunt of the flying splinters to his back. He screamed and stumbled to the side.

The duke dove and flattened himself against the rails, protected in part by the very mechanical that had just fired.

One of the cannonballs had gone wide—since the ship was bobbing and swaying so much—and hit the pilot's bubble. It exploded into a gout of blue flame and orange sparks a few seconds later.

One of the soldier mechanicals across the deck had been hit by friendly fire. It, too, exploded into flames.

Below them, the hallways were flooded with gas. With the massive cannonball holes, it was only a matter of time before a spark set everything off.

The bully boy let go of Sophronia. Too injured from the blast, he fell back.

The duke was occupied trying not to fall off the ship. The Chutney had collapsed to his knees and was bleeding profusely from a shredded side. The other bully boy—Sophronia swallowed bile—had been lying right about where one of the cannons landed.

Monique twirled out of the Chutney's reach and in a graceful movement crouched down. Unslinging the carpetbag from her back, she pulled out two square packs. They looked like wrapped foot warmers, only with reticule tops, and each had two straps.

She tossed one to Sophronia, who caught it with both hands, dropping her fan in the process.

"Parachute." Monique's smile was feral. "Latest design out of Paris. Put it on like so." She donned hers with the two straps around her arms and the boxy part over her back, reticule mouth up. "Jump over, and when you're well clear of the ship, pull the ribbon there. Should deploy like a great big parasol."

"It *should*?"

"They haven't been tested yet."

"Wonderful."

“You have a better idea? I know you want to be all noble and go down with the school, but Sophronia, who will be left in the world for me to dislike as much as you?”

“Why, Monique, I didn’t know you cared.” Sophronia tried hard to get the parachute on over her bad shoulder.

Monique gave her a look. Then she climbed over the bleeding Chutney, kicking him in the face hard with her burgundy leather boot, leapt over the railing, and with a tremendous heave, shot herself forward into the air. She’d need to clear the other decks as she fell.

Sophronia scrambled to see if she made it.

But the duke was on her, his hands around her throat. “Give me that parachute, young lady.”

The Chutney struggled to his feet, nose bloodied by Monique’s heel. He heard those words and then he, too, closed in, eyes desperately fixed on Sophronia’s back.

One thing at a time, thought Sophronia. She heaved hard, trying to shake the duke from her throat. She’d dropped her fan. She hadn’t any more explosives. Her nails scored at the duke’s wrist.

He was yelling and punctuating each word with a shake. “You. Are. Not. Permitted. To. Marry. My. Son!”

If Sophronia hadn’t been struggling to breathe, she would have disabused him of the notion. *The very idea!*

Then the Chutney was on her as well.

The men were fighting her but also fighting each other.

“It’s *my* parachute,” yelled the duke.

“Come now, Golborne.” The Chutney sounded cool and reasonable. “I outrank you. Think of the good of the Picklemen. By rights the chute belongs to me.” He shoved at the duke’s face with one hand while with his other he tried to rip the pack from Sophronia’s back.

The ship lurched.

Any moment now, thought Sophronia, *the gas below us will ignite*. She had no idea how fierce an explosion that would be, or how it might affect the decks above and below. But now that Monique had provided her a means to escape, she actually wanted to live.

Her original plan had been to run to the midship and ride out the crash there, it being the least damaged part of the school. The whole point was

that they crash down on the belly of that section, on top of the hold full of mechanimals, destroying their ability to function, but keeping them in one place for the authorities to find as proof of the Pickleman plot.

But right now, the parachute felt like a much better idea.

Sophronia twisted around and got a look up into the sky, or rather down toward the ground. It was hard to tell in the dark, but it certainly looked like the lights were getting closer. They were falling faster than they had been.

Then there came an animal scream. Like nothing Sophronia had ever heard before, human but not. Not werewolf, either.

Something hit the Chutney full force and landed atop him, carrying him backward.

Professor Braithwope's lips were stretched wide, his fangs impossibly long. His mouth seemed to split his head in two—a black maw slashed with sharp pointed death. Above it the mustache was all spiky menace.

The Chutney screamed, "You can't! You can't! We haven't been introduced!" But the vampire was beyond introductions. He bit down on the man's fat neck and began to suck.

Sophronia had only a brief moment to take this in, as the duke was still on her, trying to get one arm around her neck while the other tore at the pack on her back.

Not that I want you up against a strangler, ladies, Lady Linette's voice said in her head, *but remember one thing—if they are very earnest in their concentration, they forget to protect elsewhere.*

Sophronia wasn't wearing skirts. She kicked back, not at his gentleman's area, but hard to the inside of the man's knee. An unexpected strike toward a questionable choice of leg wear—yellow hose indeed!

He cried out in pain and his hold loosened.

Sophronia turned in his grasp so they were face-to-face. She scraped with her good hand, trying to claw out his eyes, but she couldn't get her arm up far enough. The most she got was an ear, which she yanked as hard as she could. Desperately, her bad hand searched her pockets for something, anything, a weapon, a… small bottle.

Almost of its own accord, her hand remembered what her brain did not, the execution of the fan and sprinkle maneuver. With her thumb she popped open the lid of her perfume container, specially designed by Vieve to be opened one-handed. She dashed the contents into the duke's face. The

world smelled briefly of grain alcohol and lemon. The duke squealed, piglike, and let her go, more, she thought, in surprise than in pain.

Sophronia took several quick steps away, leapt over the railing of the squeak deck, and launched herself, as if she were diving into a lake, out into the star-studded night. Well, to be less poetic and strictly truthful, it was a damp, misty night, full of smoke and the sparks of a dying dirigible.

She cleared the widest point of the airship, barely. She had jumped overboard at a point between balconies. A little to either side, and she would have landed with a splat instead of free-falling. It was not a graceful dive, more a frantic tumble. Thus, she was facing up when the whole forward section of the school exploded into flames—billowing orange gas and fire. The brightness of it lit up the sky, illuminating the carnage that had once been a friendly caterpillar-like dirigible.

Two balloons gamely tried to hold up the wreckage. In fact, as half the ship dropped away, the lighter burden caused what remained to bob upward. Until one of the balloons caught fire, flames licking at the oiled material.

Sophronia became occupied with her own problems, grabbing desperately for the deployment ribbon for the parachute. *I probably should have held it when I jumped, like Monique.*

The lights of the city below her were getting dangerously close. Sophronia finally found the ribbon and pulled. Something whuffed out behind her, and a moment later she jerked. Her bad shoulder screamed in pain, but she caught wind and was drifting instead of falling, like dandelion fluff upon a breeze.

She landed in someone’s backyard in the outskirts of London.

Sophronia was not ashamed to admit that she positively *flopped*. She sprawled back onto a damp patch of earth, among what once had been, before she landed on it, a vegetable box full of Brussels sprouts. She lay on her back watching the carnage she had wrought flash in the sky above her and smelled the cabbage-fart scent of fresh Brussels sprouts. All her brain could contemplate was the fact that, of all vegetables, she was rather fond of sprouts.

In Which We Are All Finally Finished

When the school exploded above London that night in early January of 1854, there were fewer witnesses than there might ordinarily have been. Many were occupied with a mass mechanical shutdown. Those who did see, dismissed it as one more eccentricity in a *very* eccentric night. Few knew what it was that died. Those who did, set out to find where the school landed when it fell from the sky.

The werewolves got there first. By the time the others arrived, they'd snuffled through the wreckage and extracted Picklemen and flywaymen—some already tied up, some bloodied, some bashed, some burned. All were annoyed with life, except, of course, those who were dead. The werewolves stacked them neatly in three piles—dead, not dead, and snack-sized.

Conveniently, one of the dead Picklemen had turned ghost and proved willing to cooperate. After all, he had nothing left to lose. After the werewolves found a vast number of illegal mechanimals, the ghost explained the whole invasion plan. The werewolves sent off for the Bureau of Unnatural Registry, various government representatives, the Staking Constabulary, and all manner of other authorities who might be spared from one mechanical crisis to see about another.

Soap was there. A wolf none of the others knew, a loner unwilling to fraternize with a pack. He hunted long after the others had stopped. His nose, although miraculous in its abilities, couldn't find the one scent it was looking for. The scent that lingered with him even when she wasn't near. So his hope turned to fear.

The hive's rescue dirigible arrived, full of sooties and Mademoiselle Geraldine. The headmistress explained everything she knew, or at least pretended to, under the solicitous attention of various large gruff men. She made for an excellent front, in more ways than one, while her students and sooties quietly avoided questioning.

Even Monique showed up, a great deal later, after she had reported to her hive. It was a miracle she came at all. At first they thought it remnant loyalty to her old school. But then, after she filled in some details concerning the last of Sophronia's adventure, she demanded the return of her airship. "That dirigible is my responsibility. I should like it back now."

Since it wasn't part of the investigation, the authorities permitted her repossession. She left, with a few sooties paid to help float, but with no more information about Sophronia's survival than anyone else.

At which point, Soap panicked.

The skinny, black-furred loner wolf started weaving back and forth, a whine he couldn't control keening out. The Staking Constabulary thought he might be mad, and prepared their silver to attack if necessary.

Soap thought he'd know. If Sophronia died, he thought, somehow he would be aware of that fact—feel it in his bones. But there was nothing, no clue, no message she'd left in the wreckage, just a few of her dresses and some bits from her room in a pile. Her scent was on one or two of the prisoners, their bonds were her handiwork, but nothing more.

Dawn was soon to come—Soap could certainly feel *that* in his werewolf bones. There was only one more possibility. So he left.

He was too far gone in beast to care that Dimity and Agatha stood sobbing to one side, clutched together, certain their friend had died. He registered his old enemy, Felix Mersey, crying, the charcoal smell of wet kohl from the lines about his eyes as it ran down his face. What right had he to cry? His father had survived, although both the duke's legs were broken. Soap spared the duke a glance—the man who had killed him once was in the Bureau of Unnatural Registry's custody amid mutterings of high treason. Wolf Soap found it all petty and inconsequential when his Sophronia was missing.

His beast brain could remember but one thing: Regent Square an hour before dawn. And dawn was coming. So Soap ran back into London as fast as supernatural speed could take him.

Sophronia extracted herself from the Brussels sprouts and thought about the time. She wondered what she should do and how she was going to get anywhere to do it. Her plan had finished with the ship. With no other ready options, she headed to Regent Square on the off chance that Soap would remember their meeting place—because really, what else was there to do?

She had to walk, and it was a long walk, because she hadn't any money and no hackney would stop to pick *her* up—a roughed-up boy with two black eyes, a useless arm, and a slight limp. *Perceptions,* thought Sophronia as she hobbled along, *really are everything in this world.*

She didn't quite make it in time. It was about half an hour before dawn when she finally stumbled into Regent's Park. Sophronia had never been so tired, or so thirsty, or so hungry in her life. She tumbled onto a small patch of ground under a thorny bush and lay there, aching. Every bone in her body had something to say about the state of the universe, loudly and likely profanely. Her skin hurt all over, and her mind was pressed down with the weight of the lives she had taken. Like the mechanicals who had gone before her, she simply shut down.

Soap, who was running a pattern about the park, nose forward, found her sleeping. He entirely forgot he was still a wolf and licked her face all over.

Sophronia awoke to slobber and wolf breath.

She couldn't have been happier. She wound her good hand through his thick black fur and rested her chin atop his ruff. Foolish boy, he wriggled about onto his back, tail wagging in an excess of delight. It was almost embarrassing, if it hadn't been so cute.

Then Soap remembered himself—or at least that there was another half of himself to remember—and transformed. Only now he was naked, crouched on the ground next to her, and that really was embarrassing.

"Soap, what are you—"

And then they were both kneeling, and Sophronia was in his arms. Embarrassment didn't really matter, for he was kissing her fiercely and that was awfully nice, although also embarrassing. Her lip had been split at some point and her face really did ache, but she hadn't the strength to stop it even if she'd wanted to.

Eventually, he paused, tilted her back, and took a good long look at her.

"I thought you were dead."

"Evidently not, or I'm a rather substantial ghost."

Soap kissed her again, because he could, and because she wasn't a ghost, although this time carefully on the uninjured side of her mouth. Sophronia liked that so much, she forgot about her injuries, for a short space of time, and kissed him back.

Finally he drew away. Both of them were out of breath, as if they had been swimming in a cold lake. Though that was not at all how Sophronia felt.

"It won't work, Soap. The dewan. My parents, society, no one will permit—"

Soap put his hand over her mouth. "Enough of that. Think of it as a challenge."

Sophronia cocked her head.

"No, *listen* to me for a change. What you have forgotten is that we are both already outside of society. I don't have to fit into your world, and you are already in mine. We share these shadows. What did you think would happen with your indenture? The dewan knows that you're better in the field. You'd be wasted on marriage to some prince or duke. Why do you think he's kept me secret? He wants us teamed up—intelligencers to the Crown, Geraldine's trained and werewolf strong. I think we'd make a great pair, in more ways than one."

Sophronia really considered what he was saying. And, shockingly, it seemed *almost* possible.

She stuck her tongue through her lips to lick his hand. With a start, he dropped it.

She looked into his eyes. "Marriage would not be possible. No office would provide a license, not to you and me, not for any bribe."

"Did I ask to wed? I was rather hoping we could live happily in sin for a very long time. *Lovers* has a nice ring to it."

Sophronia huffed out a startled laugh. "How very French. No one of any rank would receive me if they knew." But she kind of liked the idea. *I would never have to lose my freedom to a husband. I thought Soap would insist on being honorable, because he is such an honorable person. Silly of me not to remember he can also be sensible.*

"Shadows, my heart. No one need know."

"Endearments, already?"

If he could have, Soap would have blushed. "Too soon? I've said it so

often in my head, it slipped out."

Sophronia tried a tentative smile. "I don't mind. It's only, what do I call you?"

Soap's face lit up. He knew she wasn't trying to evade the conversation, that she liked the idea. "I'm rather partial to *honey-sop piggle-wig*."

Sophronia raised an eyebrow.

Soap grinned at her. "You'll come up with something, but it has to happen naturally."

"Very well, dear… No, that doesn't work."

Soap wrinkled his nose. He had a very nice nose. "Most certainly not. Too stiff."

"I'll give it consideration, honey-sop piggle-wig."

"Please don't. When you think about things, Sophronia, they only get more complicated. This thing between us could be so very easy, if you let it." He spread both his hands over her waist, daring to move them in a circular caress. Sophronia felt warmer than she ought where he touched her.

"If I choose you, Soap, I intend to honor the choice. We will have to determine, together, what that means."

"I don't want to hold you through loyalty, my heart."

Sophronia cocked her head. "Yes, you do. Loyalty is the only moral compass I have. It's our best foundation. And you have earned it."

Soap's face fell. "And what of love?"

Sophronia was uncomfortable with the intimacy of the question, but she also knew that this would be part of their future. One couldn't live in shadows without some clarity. Soap would need to know her heart. Sophronia examined it closely. *Am I strong enough to risk giving it to him?*

"Yes, that, too. We always did belong to each other, didn't we?" With which she finally took on the responsibility of allowing him to love her.

"Took you long enough to accept." He'd heard the vow under her words.

It seemed almost ritually sacred to kiss at that juncture. It was also terrifying and overwhelming.

And because Soap understood her so well, he drew back, giving her time to realign her perspective on the way the world worked.

He changed the subject. "How did you get here?"

"Oh, you know, I happened to be in town. I hear the new muffs are in from France."

Soap started to smile and then wouldn't let himself. "Oh, but really, my heart, what did you do to yourself?" He whispered fingers near her eyes and nose, careful not to apply any pressure.

"It's a very long story."

"*Two* black eyes?"

"And a shoulder out of its socket. Not to mention various other assorted bumps and bruises. I did jump out of an airship, I'll have you know."

"And take on a whole mess of Picklemen and flywaymen, said Mademoiselle Geraldine."

"Oh, good, she made it down safely? And Dimity and Agatha and the sooties?"

"All in far better condition than you, I'll have *you* know. Even the appalling Felix Mersey. Not to mention the dratted Monique." Soap's lip curled on those names.

Sophronia sighed. "I'll have to give her a different moniker. She did, kind of, save my life, in the end."

"How awful for you." He stroked her matted hair with one callused hand.

"I know!"

Soap became plaintive. "Do you think you might leave the world to right itself for a while now?"

"I don't know if I can afford to. What's happened since I fell from the sky?"

"I've not been paying the best of attention. I've been looking for you. We thought you died."

Sophronia struggled to sit up on her own. "Dimity and Agatha think I'm dead?"

Soap nodded, nuzzling her neck on her good side. That did feel nice. It was the only part of her not injured.

But this was serious—her friends were in distress. "I can't have that. Poor dears, we must go to them immediately." She was also worried about the oncoming dawn. "And we should get you indoors."

"Mmm. Quite apart from my werewolf condition, the city will be waking up soon. As it stands, we are both likely to be locked up for indecent exposure. The dewan is at the palace with the queen, has been since the mechanicals attacked. He's no use to us."

Sophronia was hesitant. “We could go to my sister’s, but I don’t think she could cope with my appearance. I’m certain she couldn’t cope with yours. I wouldn’t want to shock her into early childbirth.”

Soap agreed. “You know the nearest discreet location as well as I. Should we chance it?”

Sophronia was skeptical but willing. “At least I can be assured a bath and a nice change of clothes. We’d better go now, before sunrise. His drones won’t let us in without his approval.”

Soap stood, and Sophronia looked away quickly, as yet not entirely prepared. *A girl can know too much about the man she loves*, Dimity once said.

He bent and scooped her up.

“I can walk.”

“I must carry you to disguise my lack of clothing.”

“Oh, very well, although I suggest that when you pull the bell rope, you stop trying.”

Soap only strode off. Her weight was nothing to him, and he certainly moved a great deal faster than she could at that point.

The vampire himself answered the door, wearing a robe of royal-blue quilted silk with teal embroidered peacock feathers and gold lace trim, clearly near to taking his repose. Despite this, there was a hum of activity to the house behind him that suggested *things were afoot*.

“Kitten! Is that you? *Horrid* eye paint, my pet. You should fire your maid this instant. And here I was *just* about to retire. Yet I’m certain you are full of *delicious* stories and know everything there is to be known about *everything*. It’s *too bad* of you. Couldn’t you have come a little bit sooner, poppet?”

Sophronia gave a little smile. “Dear Lord Akeldama, I’m afraid I was all tied up. Or do I mean tying up? But please, may we seek refuge for the day? As you can see, I’m not quite the thing.”

Lord Akeldama’s eyes were hooded. “My dear *girl*, you aren’t in serious legal trouble, are you?” The hesitation referred to Soap. They had not been introduced, so the vampire could not address him directly. Lord Akeldama’s reluctance was to be expected. After all, it wasn’t normal, even in his long lifetime, to have a naked black man carrying a badly beaten girl turn up on one’s doorstep.

Sophronia presented her bribe. “If I told you that the dewan is my patron and Soap here is the reason, would you let me in to hear the story?”

Lord Akeldama threw the door wide. “Do come in—*I insist!*—and your fine young man. Oh, my, is he wearing anything at all? Sophronia, did you bring me a present?”

“No,” said Sophronia, cheerfully. “I brought you a werewolf, but he entirely belongs to me.”

The vampire pouted at her and didn’t look the least surprised. “Selfish girl. *Lucky* but selfish.” However, he also stepped back so they could enter. “Welcome—yes, you *are* adorable—welcome.”

Soap, who had just walked through London carrying her and wearing nothing, looked embarrassed for the first time that night under the vampire’s appreciative gaze.

Still, an invitation from a vampire was never to be treated lightly. Soap knew enough to say, “Thank you kindly, my lord.”

“My very great pleasure.” Lord Akeldama closed the door behind them. “Of course I knew the dewan had a new pup.”

Soap started at that.

“Don’t worry, my beauty. Your secret is safe in my household. But the fact that my little *kitten* here was involved, *that* I did not know.”

Sophronia was ready to fulfill her part of the bargain. “Few do. Soap was injured badly, shot by a Pickleman. I leveraged my indenture to convince the dewan to bite Soap outside of claviger status.”

Lord Akeldama evaluated Soap again, with something more than appreciation. “And he survived? *Remarkable.* And quite romantic. You two make for an unusual pairing.”

Soap began to bristle at the implied criticism, his arms tightening around Sophronia.

“Now, now, little wolf, I *like* unusual pairings.” The vampire smiled without showing fang.

Soap relaxed slightly.

“Just back there, my *sweethearts*, into the drawing room. And now, much as I would *delight* in hearing *positively everything else* that has happened to you lately, I’m afraid I am about to drop dead. Bed awaits. Pilpo will look after you.” Without further ado, Lord Akeldama whisked up the stairs, seeking his private chamber.

Soap said, “I’m going to need to sleep soon, too. Sun isn’t as difficult for me as for vampires, but I’m young and it’s challenging. My heart, please don’t tell anyone *else* about me? The dewan wants it secret. Not only do I have to obey him, but it’s better for us this way.”

“I wouldn’t worry.” Sophronia made her voice as calm and reassuring as possible. “Lord Akeldama is *like* that. And he won’t talk. He never talks about important things.”

Pilpo appeared at that juncture. Sophronia had met him before. A lifetime ago, it felt like. He was dark skinned like Soap and dressed impeccably, as was always the case with Lord Akeldama’s drones. As if by magic, he offered up a beautiful brocade robe for Soap. Relieved, the werewolf put Sophronia down long enough to pull it on.

Pilpo let them into a large drawing room that was gorgeously—if not comfortably—furnished. This was clearly the hub of Lord Akeldama’s household, although empty at present.

“Where is everyone?” Sophronia asked as she and Soap made their way over to a small sofa.

They sank down on it gratefully.

“My lord has us all out hunting.” Pilpo flashed a beautiful white smile. “Except me, of course. A lot happened last night, and he expects to know everything there is to know by sunset today. I suspect you two will be most helpful in this matter.”

“No wonder he invited us in.” Soap settled himself on the couch. Then, because he had no manners, he curled up with his head in Sophronia’s lap.

She let him. Her lap didn’t hurt. And this way she could play with his hair.

Pilpo manfully ignored Soap’s feet on the furniture. “But first, what do you need, my dear? Food? Tea? Something stronger?”

Sophronia sighed with pleasure. The very idea that she was safe and could rely on this capable gentleman to see to her immediate needs was a pure joy. “Tea would be lovely. And, unfortunately, I should see a physician, if you have one you trust. Also, my friends think I’m dead. Could you send a message stating the contrary to Miss Agatha Woosmoss? I believe Lord Akeldama is familiar with the young lady and should have her address. She can tell the appropriate authorities that any rumors as to my demise are grossly exaggerated.”

Pilpo nodded. “It shall all be done exactly as you wish.” And went to fetch the tea.

By the time he returned, Sophronia was also asleep, leaning precariously sideways on the sofa, her good hand on Soap’s head where it nestled in her lap. They both looked very young.

Pilpo covered Soap with a blanket and placed a pillow so Sophronia would not awaken with a crick, and then went about putting as much as he could to rights before luncheon.

Sophronia awoke at noon, ravenous, and alone—but for a sleeping Soap—in Lord Akeldama’s blindingly golden drawing room. She managed to extract herself from her lover’s heavy head without waking him. This required no real skill, for he, like most supernaturals, slept like the dead during daylight. She found a little gold bell next to her elbow that tinkled sweetly when she rang it.

Pilpo appeared. “You’re awake? Good. Feel better? What would you like first?”

“I’ll take that tea I missed before, if you would be so kind? And some breakfast, please, if it’s not too late? And then, more than anything else in the world, I want a bath.”

Pilpo laughed. “Of course, my dear.”

Other drones were home now, and one of them appeared with a piping-hot pot of some gorgeous tea, a mound of bacon and eggs, a fried kipper, buttered toast, and a scone with raspberry jam. Sophronia ate it all. After that, Pilpo helped her up—she was quite stiff—and showed her to the bathing chamber.

Sophronia spent longer than she should soaking in the fabulous hot water, though it hurt at first and all her wound dressings had to be removed. Pilpo checked on her twice, to make certain she hadn’t fallen back asleep. The third time he appeared, eyes averted, and deposited a beautiful day dress on a marble statue nearby. He said not to bother doing up the bodice, as the doctor had arrived and would want to look at her shoulder. There were assorted filmy white underthings, but no corset, which was good, as Sophronia couldn’t have possibly done it up herself.

She struggled out of the tub and dressed with care. It seemed to take a very long time. The dress was dark teal silk, with black lace trim and a skirt of three tiers. It had a jacket with tiered sleeves that closed up the front, but even so, Sophronia wished for a lady's maid. It had been chosen with care as easy to put on, but everything was a challenge with only one arm. Nevertheless, Sophronia was on her own, for Lord Akeldama didn't keep female staff. She wondered where the dress came from.

The doctor waited for her in the dressing room. He was a genial elderly gentleman with an air of discretion, very little hair, and sad eyes. He did not ask how she had acquired her injuries, merely treated them with care and concern as to her resulting appearance.

"Such a pretty girl must, perforce, be left without scars."

Certainly, he was exactly the kind of doctor Lord Akeldama would keep on retainer for his drones.

He left her with a cataplasm for her eyes, a sling for her arm—"Keep it *on* this time, young lady!"—and bandages for everything else. He then fastened her bodice for her, in the manner of a man proficient in fashion, because with her arm back in a sling she couldn't do it herself.

Sophronia returned to the drawing room to find Pilpo in his element, entertaining a chattering gathering that included Lady Linette, Sister Mattie, Pillover, Agatha, several sooties, Smokey Bones, and, best of all, Dimity. Soap was still there as well. He was also still asleep.

Dimity ran to Sophronia, looking as if she very much wanted to hug her, but settling for cheek kisses and cooing noises. Despite her bath and visit with the doctor, Sophronia knew she still looked awful. From the thinly disguised horror in Dimity's eyes, she suspected it was worse than even she could imagine.

"Oh, Sophronia, what you must have been through!"

Agatha followed, no less pleased, but not so effusive about it. She clasped Sophronia's good hand briefly with her old shy smile. "Welcome the returning hero."

"Oh, stop," said Sophronia, charmed.

Pillover mooched after the two girls. He was grinning, of all absurd things, a wide genuine smile. Sophronia would never have believed it if she hadn't seen with her own eyes.

Agatha seemed pleased with life. "Pillover is a hero, too, did you

know?”

Dimity recovered her composure at that, enough to say, under her breath, “Oh, really. He’s no better than a mangel-wurzel.”

Sister Mattie, however, agreed with Agatha. “Indeed he is. Helped us to escape, he did. Bunson’s was in league with the Picklemen, as we suspected. Well, if not in league, at least complicit. Anyway, Agatha’s young man here helped to free Lady Linette and me.”

This worried Sophronia. “Oh, dear Pill, will it detrimentally affect your school standing?”

Pillover shook his head. “No, increase it. Bunson’s doesn’t hold traitorousness against a fellow. After this, I’ll have moved up to Reprobate Genius. One step closer to true Evil.”

“Where’s Vieve?” Sophronia asked, assuming that the little inventor would have been involved in any Bunson’s escapades.

Pillover shrugged. “Said she didn’t want to see large-scale destruction of her beloved technology. Said she knew it’d be necessary, that you’d probably see to it, but she’d rather not know the details.”

Sophronia wondered if Vieve had been thinking of the Picklemen’s mechanicals or if she was smart enough to have realized all along that the airship was the target. It hardly mattered, and even if Sophronia asked, Vieve wouldn’t tell her. Sophronia respected her all the more for that.

“I left Bumbersnoot with her to be fixed.” Dimity’s tone was questioning.

“Good decision.” Sophronia approved, especially as London was likely rife with anti-mechanical sentiment right about now. “So why’d you do it, Pill? I thought you didn’t enjoy adventure.”

“Did I say I enjoyed myself?”

Sophronia did not point out that he was grinning, nor did she say anything about the fact that he kept casting little sideways glances at Agatha.

“Happy to have you here, Pill.” Sophronia hid her own smile.

“Well,” groused Pillover, resuming his normal dour expression, “so you should be.”

Dimity tutted. “Heaven forfend you enjoy yourself, you wombat.”

Agatha said nothing, although she did look a tiny bit smug.

Dimity inched close to Sophronia and clasped her good hand fervently.

“What happened after Monique left you? Please don’t keep us in suspense any longer. We were so worried.”

She led Sophronia over to a cluster of chairs around a tea table, some distance from the sleeping Soap. Sophronia chose a seat that allowed her to keep an eye on her werewolf. She wasn’t ready to let him out of her sight again. The bath had taken long enough.

Still full from her breakfast, Sophronia figured there was always room for more tea, and allowed Dimity to pour her a cup. Sipping gratefully, she leaned back and told them the story of the death of the airship.

“I do apologize, Lady Linette. There seemed no other way.”

Her former teacher shook her head, blonde curls bouncing. “We knew it was coming to an end soon, my dear. Geraldine’s girls, I’m afraid, are creatures of the past. Admissions have declined steadily over the years. No one wants their daughter to be an intelligencer anymore.”

“You won’t be starting it back up again?” Sophronia was saddened by this.

Lady Linette and Sister Mattie exchanged looks.

“Not as such,” Lady Linette explained. “Mademoiselle Geraldine now has a bee in her bonnet about starting a school for underprivileged boys, training them up to be physicians of all things. Professor Lefoux is intent on returning to France—she says England has gotten too complicated. Sister Mattie was muttering something about Cornwall, weren’t you, dear? I don’t know what I’ll do. Fortunately, I’m trained for pretty much anything.” She waggled her eyebrows, and for the first time, Sophronia noted that she wasn’t wearing her usual heavy face paint. “I am a mite exhausted by the work. I’ve been at this for three decades now.” She gave a delicate little shudder.

Agatha looked sober. “Thirty years is a lot of Sophronias to deal with.”

“My point exactly,” said Lady Linette with feeling.

A bell at the door drew Pilpo away, which was when Sophronia noticed how many drones had gathered to hear her story. It was a mark of how discombobulated she was that her guard was so far down. Some were entertaining the sooties at cards. It was hard to tell who would do better out of that deal. Smokey Bones had taken possession of a hassock near the coal scuttle, which was probably why he liked that particular spot. The drones no doubt approved of an animal so innately well dressed. They had brushed

the little black-and-white cat to a glossy shine heretofore unheard of, and popped a tiny cravat about his neck. They cooed over him in a manner the sooties took as approval of not simply their cat, but themselves as well. It was lending an air of conviviality to the gathering, only improved upon by the fact that unlimited tea, scones, and sardines were on offer. Neither Smokey Bones nor the sooties had ever had it so good.

Sophronia supposed she should have been more discreet when telling her story, but Lord Akeldama probably knew most of it and could guess the rest, even asleep. Sophronia aspired to be like that herself one day. And the sooties deserved to learn what they had been party to. They'd suffered the whip for it, after all, scones or no scones.

Pilpo returned, trailed by Monique de Pelouse.

"I thought I should find you here," she said.

"You're better at your job than I suspected," replied Sophronia.

"Nice to see you haven't suffered too many ill effects, Miss Temminnick. I brought you the morning paper. You might be interested in the headline." Monique flipped it open and read out: "'Secret Society of Picklemen Exposed.'" Then she stopped and paraphrased. "Apparently, the popular press received irrefutable evidence of a secret society of elites engaged in treason and misconduct. Evidence came straight to them, notes in the leader's own hand. My queen is a little upset that I missed getting hold of the Chutney's notes and the intelligencer records."

Sophronia gave her an arch look. "You can't have it all, Monique."

"Lord Akeldama may feel similarly." Pilpo was looking at Agatha, who blushed faintly.

"Ah. You gave them to Dimity, then, I take it?" Monique was no fool.

Sophronia inclined her head.

Monique sighed. "Well, the repercussions are good so far as my countess is concerned. What with that and the rebellion last night, not to mention two reputed deaths, there is wide-scale public outcry against mechanical technology. Mobs have dug up the tracks all over London. People are ripping them out of their houses and piling them in the streets. There's scrap metal to be collected on every corner. It's a pity we couldn't control it, but the Picklemen are shamed and disbanding, and that's all my queen really cares about."

She tossed the paper at Dimity, who caught it easily.

“Beautifully done, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

Dimity saluted her with the paper.

There was a long awkward silence. Monique stood, poised. She showed no repercussions from the previous evening’s activities. Her skin was flawless. She even looked well rested. It was revolting.

Sophronia reached for her nose, wincing at the touch.

Monique stayed, expectant, her attention on Lady Linette. Monique’s posture was perfect, not a hair out of place. Her visiting dress was an expensive French design of printed blue muslin that looked almost like the pattern on Sophronia’s mother’s fine china. Her sleeves were wide and fringed. Perhaps the gown was a little too spring, but Sophronia realized with a jolt, they were headed into spring anyway. New Year’s was over.

A silent battle of wills occurred between Lady Linette and Monique.

The teacher nodded. “Very well. I pronounce you finished, Monique de Pelouse.”

The lovely blonde relaxed at that, as if she had been waiting a long time. Perhaps she had. Then, without another word, she strode from the room.

Lady Linette sighed. “Not that it matters anymore.”

Dimity said, bravely, “What about us, Lady Linette? Surely Sophronia deserves recognition, at the very least?”

Lady Linette gave a half smile. “She’s already finished, which I believe she knows.”

Sophronia nodded.

“And you and Miss Woosmoss as well, my dear. It was a brave rescue and a daring charge across the countryside on wolf-back. I could not have devised a more taxing exam.” Sister Mattie took pleasure in the pronouncement.

Lady Linette added, “Not to mention the initiative needed to seek help of a hive. Particularly after they once kidnapped you, Miss Plumleigh-Teignmott.”

Agatha smiled. “We’re finished?”

Dimity looked like she wanted to cry. “We’re really finished? Mummy will be so proud.”

Lady Linette patted Sophronia on the knee. “We shall overlook that you destroyed my entire school, shall we? Just this once, my dear. Try not to do it again to any other school, all right?”

Sophronia took the recommendation to heart. “I’ll certainly try, Lady Linette, but I’m not making any promises.”

AFTERWORD

That night was remembered in infamy as the Great Pickleman Revolt of 1854 and among the untutored masses as the Mechanicals' Uprising. No household in England ever again employed mechanized staff. Most mechanicals were willingly destroyed in the space of six months. The government hunted down the rest. Bumbersnoot, the only mechanimal to survive eradication, was gifted to Queen Victoria in a secret ceremony. He was specially exempt from destruction. Due to Vieve's modifications, he became the Royal Alarm Dog, in case mechanicals rose up again. Queen Victoria grew terribly fond of the little chap, and through him, dogs in general. As a result, the royal household kept a number of canines through the years, a passion that persists to this day. Rumor is that Bumbersnoot still rattles about, well loved and carefully tended, shedding small ash piles in Buckingham Palace—the old family retainer, just in case.

Poor Vieve never forgave England for the technological destruction. She stayed long enough to graduate with distinction from Bunson's and then left in pursuit of further education at L'École des Arts et Métiers in France—still disguised as a boy. She eventually set up shop with her aunt in Paris, producing a respected line of domestic women's gadgets, all of them highly functional and quite deadly. Sophronia, Agatha, and Dimity visited her establishment for all their needs—after all, ladies of quality always shop in Paris.

The school was demolished for scrap. There was no sign of Professor Braithwope, and no one ever saw him again. This was, perhaps, a good

thing. If he survived, with so many kills under his cravat, even the most militant of hives would have called for his execution—he was no longer civilized. If, on occasion, Professor Lefoux returned from Paris, and took a long train ride, and then a long carriage drive far out into the wilds of Dartmoor, it was thought mere sentimentality for a life she had lost. If Swiffle-on-Exe heard rumors of a very odd hermit, no one connected the two. If, on the occasional evening, stories of that hermit wearing a top hat and waltzing with the rabbits percolated through the town, scaring schoolboys, he was thought no more than the local drunk. And then the local bogeyman. And then mere myth. For no one thought to wonder that their dancing hermit had lived a very long time, whot?

Mademoiselle Geraldine formally adopted Handle and saw him through medical training. Together, they immigrated to America—fewer vampires—where he wrote a popular, well-respected book in his later years entitled *Plain Home Talk Embracing Medical Common Sense*, directed at young ladies of quality. It went into multiple editions and allowed him to retire a wealthy man.

Sister Mattie settled into life in a small seaside resort, where she grew prizewinning foxgloves and had a thriving business in medicinal herbs, common pest poisons, and fancy soaps.

Lady Linette opened an acting school in London and produced a bevy of successful female dramatists who all had a habit of treading the boards for more years than was natural, marrying above their station, and ending it badly—for the husband. She numbered the well-known stage siren Miss Mabel Dair among her graduates. Although Sophronia saw her old teacher occasionally, she never did find out Lady Linette's true age. Nor how she had become a lady. Nor where she was born, accent notwithstanding. By then Sophronia had learned to accept that there were limits to even her abilities. So Lady Linette kept her secrets—or possibly other people's.

It took a year, but in 1855 the dewan finally saw his Clandestine Information Act voted into law. All mechanicals were declared a threat to the commonwealth. However, antisupernatural members of parliament were able to include a line naming supernatural creatures enemy intelligencers. In order to prevent vampires and werewolves from accessing mechanical and mechanimal technology, they were forbidden to see the patents. The dewan was livid, but Sophronia, who suspected that control over the technology

had been Countess Nadasdy's—and possibly Lord Akeldama's—end game all along, was happy to see mechanicals outside of *everyone's* control.

"I understand a certain mysterious butler was integral to the signing. Will you ever tell me about him?" Sophronia asked the dewan, sipping a small sherry after dinner one evening.

Soap smiled and looked up from his snifter of brandy. "I told you she wouldn't forget."

The dewan huffed in pleased exasperation. "Of course not. How did you find out he was at the CIA signing, little miss?"

"You indentured me for my discretion, sir."

"Mmm. Only with my own secrets."

Silence met that.

He snorted and let the matter drop. "Funny you should ask about him. He's your first assignment. Somewhat."

Sophronia straightened. Since moving in, he'd given her the odd task around town, but nothing that stretched her training. She was getting bored, and the butler character was intriguing.

"He's the guardian of the child who inherited the mechanical patents. I've had to guarantee his signature and his silence over an Egyptian affair by agreeing to protect his ward."

"Egypt?"

"No, I'm not sending you abroad. The child lives here in London. Certain unsavory Italians are interested in the toddler and *steps must be taken* to protect her. You are to be those steps."

Sophronia grimaced. It sounded excessively dull. "You want me to watchdog an infant?"

"Worse. For the sake of propriety, I'm installing you as nanny. There is a ball tomorrow night that the mother will be attending. She's frivolous. You are to become friends, and then a family connection will be miraculously discovered. You will be invited to stay for an indefinite time."

Sophronia nodded. Right now she was supposedly traveling abroad with Agatha, as her parents would not approve of her living with the dewan under *any* circumstances but marriage. Installing her as a semipermanent companion with a respectable family was the single best way for her mother to utterly forget about her.

She reached across the table and took Soap's hand.

His dark eyes were pleased. “You won’t be here, but you’ll be living close.”

“Pup’s not trained yet,” said the dewan.

“I take it the plan is to set us into motion as field agents as soon as he is?” Sophronia was hopeful.

The dewan nodded. “Between the two of you, there are few infiltration gaps. What parts of society you can’t get into, he can. You’ll be a good team, so long as you are circumspect.” He was glaring at their entwined fingers.

Sophronia did not move her hand from Soap’s. “I am *always* circumspect.”

The dewan sighed. “Children, if you persist in this you’ll be stuck living in shadows all your lives.”

Sophronia lifted Soap’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “We like the shadows. That’s where all the power is.”

Soap looked to his Alpha. “We’ll spend many happy years together in sinful incognito, interfering with the world for the greater good.”

Sophronia added, “Once Soap’s safely loaner status, and I’ve served out my indenture to you, we shall run around having adventures overseas and contribute to Her Majesty’s cause in an entirely unnoticed way. It will be delightful.”

Soap lifted and kissed her hand in turn. “It will, won’t it?”

The dewan sniffed. They were prone to shocking the old wolf. “Young people these days. Incorrigible.” He stood and left the dining table in pursuit of less modern sensibilities.

Sophronia and Soap turned their chairs to face one another. Sophronia put both her hands on Soap’s thighs, warm and hard under her palms. She leaned forward to kiss him. She liked it so much, and got to do it so often, she was becoming quite brazen about taking advantage of his proximity. No wonder the dewan was shocked.

“I’ve been thinking about endearments.” Sophronia looked serious. “I have settled on *popsey*.”

Soap was surprised into laughter. He scooped her up and settled her into his lap. “Oh, have you, indeed?”

“Yes, and you shall endure it manfully.”

“If that’s the worst I have to suffer from you, my heart, I’m grateful for

it.” Soap nuzzled her gently.

Sophronia quite agreed. But then Soap was sensible like that.

The End

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About the Author

Credit: Vanessa Applegate

New York Times bestselling author **GAIL CARRIGER** writes to cope with being raised in obscurity by an expatriate Brit and an incurable curmudgeon. She survived her early years by reading most of her local library and memorizing Greek battles. Eventually she escaped small-town life and inadvertently acquired several degrees in Higher Learning. In pursuit of further finishing, Ms. Carriger traveled the historic cities of Europe, subsisting entirely on biscuits secreted in her handbag. In the Finishing School series, Ms. Carriger takes her readers back to a time before the Parasol Protectorate, explaining the mysteries of her steampunk world and visiting a few old friends. She now resides in the Colonies, where she is surrounded by fantastic shoes and insists on tea imported from London.